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Winter Memories and a Map of Time

Special Short Story: The Palm of a Gentle Hand

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Prologue

From my first time in a hospital bed, I've learned that humans can't live without windows. Even with my phone, a TV, and a portable game console, I definitely wouldn't be able to endure this if I couldn't look out toward the scenery stretching out from the window, and watching the sky as it changes over time. Even though it's just through a piece of glass, and I'm not really isolated from the world, I still feel a sense of security.

"You'll be discharged… next week?" Kougami, who has come to visit me, asks while sitting in a chair, swinging her leg.

My mom rushed out to go buy drinks at the store, so it's just the two of us in the hospital room.

"On Tuesday. I'll be able to go home for a little while on the weekend," I reply while thinking about how it'll be nice to take a shower during the daytime.

Even if I can't help it since I'm in the hospital, I feel uncomfortable talking to a girl when I'm all sweaty. Especially since Kougami always smells nice, like shampoo.

"Well, you haven't been home in a while."

"Yeah. I can't wait to be able to eat a lot once I'm home. The portions of hospital food are small, and don't have much flavour."

She laughs at my response. She's wearing black tights with shorts over them. She's sitting with her hands on the seat on either side of her. I don't know where to look.

I turn to look outside again. Even though it's quite warm today, there's still big, fluffy flakes of snow dancing in the air. It's an unusual kind of snow for Asahikawa. In the winter, the snow is usually dry and crumbly. Even though this area is known for snow, it's hard to make snowmen and have snowball fights. Even if you pack it tight, it just falls apart. I remember seeing the soft snow in Hakodate. I wonder if it's snowing over there right now…

"It sounds like it's only going to get colder, starting tomorrow… Winter is already in full force."

"Yeah… I'm worried." I reply, still distracted.

I'm worried about how the Kujo family is doing with the cold. That old house gets cold in the winter. I hope nothing has happened to them. How are they handling all the shovelling? It has to be too painful for gran, with her bad knees. Is Hector going on enough walks? What if Sakurako-san caught a cold? Well, before I met them, they managed to deal with past winters with just the two of them. I know that there's no point in worrying, but I still think it's better to have as many people as possible to help out.

It seems like Kougami has been able to tell what I'm thinking about this whole time. She smiles and says, "if you're worried, you should just contact them."

"I guess so…"

Even if I do, they might not tell me if they're struggling.

"…So you should hurry up and contact them, Tatewaki-kun."

"Me?"

“Yeah.” She nods.

“…Otherwise, you’ll never see Sakurako-san again.”

I meet up with Sakurako-san at a fast food restaurant near the Twin Harp bridge, while she’s heading home from an appointment in Sapporo. As usual, she’s late. I wasn’t originally planning on coming here today.

Until I got a call from Sakurako-san, I was planning on participating in a “huge yakisoba bento” speed-eating contest with my friend, Imai. The portions for it are twice the size of the usual yakisoba bento, and if you don’t eat it fast enough, it gets harder. There’s a rule against drinking anything other than the soup that it comes with. So far, I’ve had one win and four losses. Imai plays tennis, so he can eat more than me, and faster than me, even though he’s so thin. It just doesn’t feel right for me to not chew my food properly. Kougami joined midway through once, so Imai picked up his speed tremendously, which ended in my loss.

This time, we’d decided that the winner would get to have tea with Kougami. Imai has a crush on her, after all. It makes me feel tired and overstuffed when all that yakisoba expands in my stomach.

After I’ve finished the drink I ordered, and all the ice has melted, Sakurako-san finally shows up. She’s wearing light makeup, and is dressed a bit more maturely than usual. No, actually, it’s more like she’s wearing something appropriate for her age. I don’t know her exact age, but she’s somewhere in her late 20s.

“Hi, how was Sapporo?”

“What do you mean?” She tilts her head to the side.

“I didn’t really mean anything in particular. It was just a normal greeting.”

She wrinkles her nose when I give her a wry smile. I guess she doesn’t want to have a meaningless conversation. It seems like she isn’t in a very good mood.

“If you want to know how the weather is in Sapporo, you can check on your phone. On the highway between Takikawa and Sunagawa there was a bit of a snow storm, but that’s normal. Other than that, everything went fine. Quite a lot of snow fell in Sapporo the other day, so the roads were still crowded. There were people making snow statues for the festival, too. Near the station-“

“That’s enough! It was stupid of me to ask such a meaningless question.”

“Exactly.”

I sigh, and buy her an ice cream as an apology. I buy myself a small fried potato.

“So, why today?” I ask while trying not to burn myself on my piping hot, freshly fried potato.

“I visited my ill uncle yesterday,” Sakurako-san responds while scooping some ice cream out of her cup.

“I see… how was he?”

“…His condition wasn’t too bad… but he likely won’t live much longer. If he develops pneumonia, it’ll be very quick.” She replies in a cold voice. Her face has no expression. Only the drop of her gaze reveals her sorrow.

“Is that so…” I’m looking for the words to say to her.

“But that’s not what I wanted to talk about right now. It’s about this file.”

However, before my words of comfort can take shape, Sakurako-san hands me a black file folder.

“A file… Now that I think about it, you mentioned that before, right?”

I remember Isozaki-sensei and us running around the whole town searching for one of his lost students about a month ago. Although we found the student safely, a tragic incident was unravelled under a tree at that abandoned house where she was hiding. After finding the truth behind that incident, we found another skeleton with completely white bones. That skeleton was completely unrelated to the case we were dealing with, and was missing a bone in its skull. It was removed intentionally.

“My uncle has always had a habit of taking notes about everything. It was also part of his routine to remember the conversations he had and write them down. He probably liked interacting with other people more than I do. Maybe he wanted to document the people who were still alive at that moment… the dead can’t talk, after all.” Sakurako-san says, opening the file. The topmost paper has the contact information for a university written on it. “Perhaps he wanted to one day have an autobiography. He often left things like this in his files. Even though his study is full of files like this one, to me, this black A4 file is my uncle himself.”

She gently runs her hand along the folder. She’s touching it gently, like it’s something precious to her.

“Just before he was admitted to the hospital, he was investigating the case of ‘missing sphenoid bones.’ I think there may really be a ‘sphenoider,’ a criminal who removes the sphenoid bones.”

“The sphenoid bone… That’s one inside the skull, right? The one that’s shaped like a butterfly.”

She nods. “I checked in with Naoe about how the investigation with Isozaki’s student was going… It turns out the police aren’t trying to find that artist, Hanabusa, at all.”

“Why not?!”

“They think his existence is just a product of Hitoe and Minami’s imaginations. They couldn’t find any traces of him in that old house. Fingerprints, strands of hair… They only found any from those girls.”

“But what about Futaba-san’s corpse?!” I start to raise my voice, so Sakurako-san puts her finger to her lips, signalling me to be quiet.

“Old bloodstains were also found in the house. There were many fingerprints that appear to be Futaba’s around them. They still haven’t found the identity of the other corpse. It’s a difficult investigation.”

“Then who do the police think the murderer is? Having a bone stolen from a corpse is obviously sketchy!”

“They’re suspecting those girls, though it would be nearly impossible for the average person to accomplish something like that. The sphenoid bone is very thin and fragile. Taking one out would be no simple task for an amateur. If you make a mistake, it’ll shatter.”

It would be possible if the person was an expert on bones, like Sakurako-san, but not a regular girl like Futaba-san and the others. Besides that, we're talking about a human, not an animal. Just thinking about it is repulsive.

"My uncle has previously dealt with a number of bodies that were missing their sphenoid bones, the details of which are contained in this file. My uncle said that this case probably is not related to this so-called 'sphenoider.' I, however, disagree."

She traces the edges of the folder with her pink nails. The date on it is from about 10 years ago.

"The Hakodate incident. A corpse was found near Junsai Swamp in Oonuma. The police ruled it as a suicide, but the people who knew the victim thought that a criminal could have been involved, and contacted my uncle. I became interested in this file after hearing about that case."

"Then… You think that was the work of the artist?"

"I don't know, that's why I want to investigate."

I'm a bit surprised to hear that from her. "You mean… You want to personally investigate this?"

"That's right… I don't think it would be good enough to have someone else do it."

Even though she definitely wants to know the truth, she isn't usually someone who wants to walk around and do things herself much. She really isn't anything like the detectives I've heard about. If anything, she seems more like the kind of detective that sits in a chair all day.

"Next week, Ms. Shouko and I are going on a trip to Hakodate. Naoe was supposed to go, too, but yesterday he informed me that he couldn't go due to his work… I think this is my chance."

"Your chance… You don't mean to investigate this alone, do you?!"

"Are you worried that I will get Ms. Shouko involved?"

"That's part of it, but… You going out there and investigating alone is…"

"There's no helping it, there isn't another option."

"You're right, but… Maybe there's something…" I mutter.

"Today I wanted to ask you if you could walk Hector while I'm away. Gran's knees are in bad shape, so she can't handle long walks in winter… I'll pay you with this," She says, and holds out a cake from a store in Sapporo that I'd eaten at a party here before. Apparently she called me here to hand it over. but would she really have called me over here if it was just that? Couldn't this have been done over a phone call or email? I'm getting a strange feeling.

"Well, if it's just Hector's walks, I can handle it," I say, but I don't take the cake. Sakurako-san looks at me, puzzled. Am I misunderstanding, or does her expression seem forced? "Could it be that… You're actually worried about going alone, Sakurako-san?"

"Not really, I have no reason to be-" She immediately becomes flustered.

"…I'll go."

"What?"

"As long as it doesn't inconvenience you, I'd like to go with you and help."

"…" Sakurako-san lets out a small sigh.

"My last day of class this year is on the 21st, since I get the 24th off as a compensatory holiday. Of course I'm being impudent, so I'll handle my lodging myself."

This year the 23rd is on a Sunday, so with Christmas Eve, I have consecutive holidays. Although the opening ceremony will be earlier, everyone is excited about the Christmas holidays. On the TV they said that Christmas this year will provide a larger than average boost to the economy because of all the travel, parties, etc. Even if all the hotels are full, Hakodate has net cafes. Worst case scenario, I can spend the night at one of those.

"It's not a problem for you to stay with us, but… don't you have plans with Yuriko?"

"Kougami and I are not in a relationship."

Why is she bringing up Kougami? I'm a little annoyed.

"Not with Kougami, but I had plans to spend Christmas at one of my friend's houses, but… I can't just let you go investigate alone after hearing about it. I'll do something about Hector's walks, so please let me go with you."

Sakurako-san's face wrinkles. She looks reluctant. Maybe she really doesn't want me to come? I'm a little sad now.

"…Is it too much of a bother?"

"No, you're not bothering me." She replies immediately. "If you come along, Ms. Shouko would be delighted. Besides… I'm happy for the offer. Talking to strangers isn't my specialty."

"I'm well aware of that."

"It would be helpful to have you there… but… I don't intend to get you involved in all of this." She says, then falls silent. She forms a triangle with her fingers in front of her face. It's a truly worrisome action.

"Well there's no getting around it… You should give up…"

I look at the ground with a reluctant expression. However, I'm really worried about her investigating this incident alone. Without the help of the police, what'll happen if she finds the criminal? We both stay silent for a while.

Finally, Sakurako-san takes a deep breath and lets out a long sigh. She looks conflicted.

"I've decided that I do want you to come with me after all."

"…Huh?"

"I'm… sorry for getting you wrapped up in this, and I know that if you come with me, you might be put into a dangerous situation. It's not that I'm not thinking about your wellbeing. I know that I attract misfortune. This is a problem between me and my uncle. But I still want to trouble you with this request… please." She says quietly.

I find it strangely irritating to see her acting so timid. This isn't like her at all.

"It's not like you to believe in superstitions like that, Sakurako-san! I know you respect your uncle. I haven't met him, but I would like to, one day." I say clearly. "Please let me lend you my strength."

She slowly blinks at me in surprise, then smiles. She has an embarrassed expression. It's a smile I've never seen from her before.

"I… was hoping you'd say that." She says awkwardly.

"In that case, why didn't you just say that from the beginning? Though if this is going to involve searching for animal or human corpses, I'd like to refrain from joining you."

Besides, Hakodate is a very special place to me. My grandfather on my mother's side of the family is from Hakodate, so my grandparents used to live there. After my father died, my grandparents helped take care of my brother and I until we moved to Asahikawa. Since I was

still young, I don't remember much about Hakodate, but I do clearly remember watching the paper lanterns float down the river with my grandmother.

Hakodate is quite far away from Asahikawa, so it takes a while to get there, even on the highway. That's why it's hard for me to go there much, though I did visit once on a field trip in middle school. Unfortunately, it wasn't squid season, but there were still plenty of other things to eat since it's near the sea. By winter break next year I'll have to be thinking about plans for my future, so it won't be easy to take a trip.

"Then… Is it okay if I go along and help? Oh, but travelling with two women… wouldn't that be bad?"

"What do you mean? It's no different from when you went to Sapporo with me." She gives me a puzzled look.

"That's true, but…"

Does she have no self awareness? I'm starting to get on my last nerve.

"Ms. Shouko would be happy if you came. I'll talk to her about it. I also need her to keep everything about this case a secret. Even from Naoe and gran. If someone tells my uncle that I'm investigating this, he'll make me stop. I can't have anyone getting in my way."

"But it's okay if I know?"

"Of course. Who else would I ask for help?" She says, looking straight at me.

"…Hehe" Hearing her say that so clearly fills me with joy and embarrassment. It's not a bad feeling.

"What's with that laugh?"

"Nothing, nothing. In that case, I'll be happy to help you." I put both my hands on my thighs and give her an exaggerated bow.

"…Thank you. I'm truly grateful." She bows her head towards me. She starts to raise her head, but suddenly stops.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing… It's just… I didn't expect to be thanked." She says, surprised. She lifts her head, looking a bit displeased. "Nothing… it's really nothing. Gran's too old, so she won't be able to handle walking Hector and shovelling snow on her own."

A smile spreads across my face. Sakurako-san turns away from me and pouts. She takes a mouthful of ice cream and says, "I want to visit the bereaved family." She clears her throat and presses the file against me. "The police are hardly moving on this matter. I also can't rely on my uncle. All we can do is try to solve the mystery in this file, though that won't give us the whole truth. Besides, the file isn't complete. It seems that the last few pages are missing, or were never written."

When I open the file, it smells a bit old, and it's filled with tightly packed words. When Sakurako-san went to Sapporo, apparently she investigated her uncle's house after she visited him. It seems she couldn't find the last few pages. Her uncle always puts a summary at the end, but it looks like he didn't this time.

"I'll try visiting the people my uncle investigated again. Since it's been nearly a decade, some information will have been forgotten with time. However, I think that new things can appear only after time has passed."

"You actually… sound like a detective right now."

“Do you like that kind of thing?”

“Do you not?”

“I wonder why you like talking to other people. I just like bones, conversations never seem to go my way.” She snorts. She acts like it’s normal. Even if it’s her normal, she still wants to investigate the incident.

I bow my head again, since I don’t want to show how happy I am. “Well, I’ll do my best to help out until the end.” I say. Sakurako-san smiles sweetly.

She looks delighted. It’s a stunning smile, I’d give it 100 points. Ahh, it’s no good. I can’t resist her smile, after all. I wouldn’t even be scared to go to hell and back to protect her smile.

File-1

The medical university of Sapporo has opened a new forensic pathology course, following a local TV drama that won several awards in the Japanese media arts festival. Japanese people have a tendency to avert their eyes from ‘death.’ Many people became aware of the flaws in Hokkaido’s cause of death ruling system after watching this show.

In Finland, which has a similar population to Hokkaido, an autopsy is performed on close to 80% of corpses with an unclear cause of death. In Hokkaido, only about 5-6% have autopsies performed. This is not to say that Hokkaido is significantly lower than the rest of the country. In Japan, nationwide, the average is around 10%.

However, people have voiced their complaints about this problem that it would ruin their dignity after death. After this show aired, all the news networks started focusing on this problem, so there was no choice but to do something about it.nThus, a new forensic pathology course was established in the Hokkaido university, the Sapporo medical university, and Kiyoku university. I was selected to be a teacher for one of these new courses. The reason is simple – I was the medical supervisor for the TV show. Though, the who, how, or why about that is a secret.

I thought that there needed to be a proper demonstration of the Hokkaido cause of death ruling system. But in the end, a few people taking a new course won’t drastically affect anything. Until the Japanese law changes, nothing will happen. Yet I was still welcomed with open arms. I was given a new laboratory, with a state of the art CT, that I could use as I pleased. For the time being, I was able to conduct as many autopsies as I wanted without being warned by the university about budget restraints.

“Professor Shitara, someone is here to see you.”

I was relaxing in my teacher’s office, when the forensic autopsy technician, Aoba-kun, called out to me. We used to work at the same university together, and as far as I can tell, he’s the best person to ask if you need to remove some organs. He smiled, and pushed on the girl’s back.

She had a slender body, and wore a pure white dress. Pale skin and dark eyes that seemed unaffected by the invasive heat of the summer. She stood silently in anticipation.

That girl loved my work. That cute young lady was my niece, Sakurako. That day, I taught another peaceful lesson. Of course, if an incident occurred, the police would contact me in the morning rather than the middle of the night.

About 700 corpses are reported to the Hokkaido police each year. Of those, less than 500 are made available for study at the four university courses. A simple calculation of 500/4 can tell you that not every course will get to study a corpse every day. A lot of paperwork is involved, so thankfully we have capable secretaries. So, on a peaceful day with no meetings, I can leave the university by 7pm. Fortunately, today is one of those days, so I have plans to go out for dinner after this.

My niece is quiet, and doesn't express her emotions very well, but she's looked up to be for a long time now. Sakurako's house is in Asahikawa, but my second oldest brother and sister-in-law are currently in the middle of a divorce. At the recommendation of an attentive employee named Sawa-san, Sakurako is spending her summer holiday with me.

Most third year high school students can't take it easy over summer break, but unfortunately, my brother won't allow her to go on to university. I think that's complete nonsense in this day and age. It's truly disappointing. Sakurako is very intelligent. She has a strong interest in forensic pathology, as well. At the same time, she's very calm. I'm sure this girl could grow up to be a great forensic pathologist. If I could, I would want her to take my course. However, even though I'm her uncle, this isn't an affair I'm able to interfere with.

Unlike my Shitakuya family, who has a history of being doctors, the Kujo family, who my second oldest brother married into, is a large land owning family that was involved with establishing the city. As an old family, I'm sure they have their reasons, but really, it's absurd. I feel sorry for Sakurako, who has to be chained down by it. However, the family doesn't have a successor other than Sakurako. She understands better than anyone that she has to give up on going to university.

As one would expect, I can't show her an actual corpse until the scheduled times, but I took her into the laboratory and explained the findings from an autopsy the day before. Unfortunately, my secretary had to come with some bad news.

"Professor… The police are over there…"

"The police?"

Was I supposed to be doing something today? My secretary shakes her head when she sees my confusion. In other words, this is an unplanned visit. She makes a sour expression, noticing that something troublesome is going to happen. I have no choice but to leave Sakurako in my lab and head to the library.

"Hello…"

A familiar looking young man is standing there.

"Uhh, let's see…"

"It's Yamaji. Youichi Yamaji."

"Ah, that's right."

I remember now, he's in charge of the Hakodate area. He's been a police detective for several years, so I've met him a few times. I don't particularly dislike the police. The Hokkaido Prefectural Police help with cleaning the equipment and tidying up after an autopsy, after all. It's not exactly part of their job.

My impression of this young man is that he always pays close attention during the autopsy, so he doesn't miss a single detail. He's also careful and polite while he's cleaning up afterwards. Members of the police force are almost never used to watching autopsies. Those people still get promotions. That's because involving yourself with corpses isn't necessary for promotions. So even though he pays close attention, it won't win him any brownie points. Rather than worry and get nervous, he's the type to get to work.

"Professor, there's something I wanted to ask you about." Before even sitting down, Yamaji-kun gets right down to business. Judging by his enthusiastic tone, his request probably isn't anything official.

"Sorry, but… Today I… Kind of have plans."

"This won't take long."

He has a look of firm determination. He reminds me of the akita I had as a kid, somehow. Both him and Toranosuke won't yield once they've decided on something. I'm weak to that kind of expression.

"Sakurako, can you go meet up with Shouko-san? Take a taxi to the store first. It's the second taxi stand, okay?" I return to the lab, and find Sakurako enthusiastically looking over past autopsy records.

Fortunately, we're not going out to eat with just the two of us today. It wouldn't be a big deal if I were to be a bit late. Unfortunately, she gives me a blunt expression and shakes her head. She doesn't like taking taxis. Ever since that day, she's had a fear of white cars. Unfortunately, many of the taxis in Sapporo are white.

"You'll be fine with the university's taxi stand." I notice Aoba-kun standing in the doorway. "I'll take you down there and make sure you don't get a white car." He promises to call the company directly if they can't find a different coloured car.

Sakurako is shy around strangers, but fortunately, she doesn't seem to mind Aoba-kun. I pat him on the shoulder to express my thanks, and he smiles back at me. I know that deep down, he secretly doesn't like dealing with Yamaji-kun. Though, I wonder if he's feeling uneasy, since Yamaji-kun came all this way to talk to me.

"…Well then, what did you want to talk about?" Returning to the library, I ask my secretary to make some coffee for the two of us before we start talking.

"Professor, there's some photographs I wanted you to look at."

"Photographs?"

"Yes, pictures of a corpse that was discovered the other day." Yamaji-kun says as he pulls several pictures out of his beige bag.

I spread them out on the desk and look at them. They seem to be pictures of the corpse while it was still at the scene.

"There was a note left by the deceased, and the investigation team ruled it a suicide, but… I think foul play was involved."

"For what reason?"

"…I have a feeling of déjà vu. I feel like I remember seeing this place before."

"That isn't really…" I wrinkle my eyebrows.

Japan and Finland have an overwhelmingly different rate of autopsies performed. In Finland, performing an autopsy on a corpse is the same as following traffic lights on the road,

it's just a rule you follow. However, in Japan, a police officer or doctor who has only studied forensic pathology for 3 months can take a look at a corpse and decide the ruling right then and there. A single Finnish doctor can perform autopsies on hundreds of corpses every year. They say that in about 5% of cases they wouldn't have realized that it was a murder without an autopsy.

Even a veteran forensic scientist can't accurately guess what happened to a corpse just from looking at the outside. However, in Japan, a person who is not a forensic scientist can make a ruling just by looking at a corpse. If they say that there wasn't anything suspicious about the corpse, the whole case is brushed off. Corpses are rarely taken to forensic scientists like me. That's the current condition of Japan's cause of death investigation.

However, that doesn't mean the police are bad. No, even if that were true, it's not the people who were at the scene that are at fault. I think many of them also feel angry about the absurdity of the situation. The first mistake is in this country's laws.

As I look into the eyes of the frantic, young detective in front of me, I realize I have no choice but to agree.

"I understand. Of course you can't reach any conclusions about a case on intuition alone. However, I realized it immediately. The reason for your déjà vu. I… saw that exact same scene a few years ago."

Both his expression and voice are passionate. "I don't mean it's something supernatural or anything. A few years ago when I was in Chitose, I'm sure I saw the same corpse at lake Okotanpe."

"Lake Okotanpe?"

"That body was found at Junsai swamp… Both Okotanpe and Junsai are near large lakes. I think the environment is similar."

"Shikou lake and Onuma?"

"That's right."

Shikou lake is near Sapporo, and is Japan's northernmost non-freezing lake. It's Japan's second deepest caldera lake, and is surrounded by a quiet forest. Onuma is a lake that's a little under an hour from Hakodate by car. I'm certain that the surrounding environment is similar.

"But if it were that simple, it could just be those people chose a secluded spot. Isn't that too little to argue that they're related?"

"Since it was a hot time of year, the body at Junsai was severely decomposed, and some parts had been eaten by animals. However, the position of the head and the circumstances of the scene are very similar. Both corpses had their heads in the water. It seemed like someone had put their heads there for a reason, like some kind of ritual."

"In the water?"

"Yes. The bones of the body at Lake Okotanpe were completely white. The skull was cracked and some bones inside were missing, so it wasn't exactly the same, but quite similar." Yamaji-kun says forcefully. "I can say that after seeing both scenes. The scenes around the two bodies were exactly the same, like they were imitating something. I don't think there's any way it can be a coincidence!" Yamaji-kun hits his hands on the table to show his enthusiasm.

"Ah!" The secretary, who had just come in with a tray of coffee, lets out a small scream.

“Oh… Sorry.”

“…I’ll fix this right away.” The secretary’s voice clearly shows her displeasure about spilling the coffee on the tray, thanks to Yamaji-kun. At least nobody got burned. Right now, I feel more like drinking a cold gin tonic than coffee. She leaves us with a plate of treats, instead.

Yamaji-kun silently looks down at the butter senbei for a moment before opening his mouth to speak.

“…It’s not unusual for someone to fall with their neck like that, and I understand that animals can often cause things like this. Still… I can’t just ignore my intuition like this. I believe that there is definitely some kind of connection.”

What exactly does he want me to do about this?

“Professor, you’ve said before that intuition is important, and that if you feel that something is even a little off, it should be investigated thoroughly.”

“Sure, I do think that the power of human intuition is important. It’s because it’s often caused by unconscious connections to past experiences.”

“So that means-“ He looks at me pleadingly.

“So what do you want me to do? Do you want me to examine the body without permission? This isn’t a TV show. A police officer and a forensic science professor can’t just go off and investigate a case that’s already been closed.”

“I know that! But I still want to look into it! I’m sure you know more than anyone that an autopsy isn’t always perfect! I’ll take all the responsibility! If this really wasn’t a suicide, then who else is going to follow up on this case?!” Yamaji-kun’s voice gets louder and louder. The whole room goes silent for a moment.

“Is there anything else? For example, what part of the skull was specifically missing?”

“Ummm it was something like the sph… sphy….”

“…Sphenoid bone?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s it.”

“…” I groan.

“Um, do you understand anything from that?”

“As if! I’d have to be a magician to figure it out from just that. I was just thinking about the sphenoid bone. It’s a special bone.”

“A special bone…?”

“It’s a bone that’s behind the eyes, it's shaped like a butterfly. It’s kind of interesting, it looks like a butterfly whether you look from the front, the side, or the top. It’s very beautiful, but it’s also fragile. Anyway, what happened to the corpse?”

“It’s already been cremated.”

“I see… Hakodate… And there was nothing missing from the skull?”

“That’s right. It was just rotting.” Yamaji-kun nods.

They sure were quick to cremate that body. Hokkaido has a custom of cremating the body before there’s been a wake. There’s many theories about why that is. Some say that it’s because Hokkaido is relatively warm, or it’s because of the liberal leaning views, or that it’s to prevent decomposition when a lot of lives are lost in a natural disaster.

“Then what should I do?”

I’m not sure what he’s asking for since there isn’t even a body to examine.

“Can’t you figure anything out from these photos? Anything is fine, even if it’s just a suspicion that it might be murder, anything!”

“Isn’t that just lying? Please don’t expect me to say something unreasonable.” I can’t hold it back, and let out a small laugh.

These photos were probably taken by a coroner. Depending on the coroner, some will try to determine whether or not it was an incident, but some will just carefully take pictures and leave the scene. However, even though it’s polite, it’s hard to make any judgements from those photos.

“Please”

Still, there’s no other way. He bows deeply and stays silent, so I pick up the photos that are spread on the desk again. It seems like the corpse is a woman. Summer this year has been hot. It has been over 30 degrees almost every day both here and in Sapporo. Decomposition will progress very rapidly. The coroner seems to have judged the cause of death to be suffocation from hanging. At a glance, I can’t find anything that would indicate foul play.

“It’s a small thing, but there aren’t any rope fibres on the body’s palms, so it would be nice to look into that.”

“Rope, huh?”

“People who choose to commit suicide by hanging often try pulling on the rope before they commit the act. It could be to test the strength of the material, they feel scared, or they don’t even notice they’re doing it. Because of that, it’s rare for there to not be some pieces of rope on the skin.”

“I haven’t confirmed it, but the rope was probably… I think it’s already been returned to the family.” Yamaji-kun says. I reflexively wrinkle my nose.

Sure, that rope can be considered an item the deceased left behind, but where in the world would you find a bereaved family that’s willing to use the rope that took the life of an important person in their lives? Still, it’s something I hear often. In most cases, since it isn’t something you’d want to keep, it gets cremated with the body or put in the coffin. Regardless, it’s not my job, or his, to think over the feelings of the bereaved family. That criticism would be poorly directed. There’s a problem with Japan’s system where we don’t have organizations that help support bereaved families. This country is cold toward such families.

This corpse died due to partial hanging, meaning the body was touching part of the ground. That happens when the branch is too low, or the rope isn’t the right length. The corpse ends up looking like it’s crouching, or kneeling. One part of the body… the lower left half is submerged in the swamp. The arms had fallen towards the left leg, and the head had dropped, too. It’s in the water.

“The deceased was a nurse… Shortly before she committed suicide, a patient that was in her care suddenly passed away.”

“Well, depending on the area you work in, that’s part of the job.”

My job involves working with death, so I don’t have much empathy for corpses. However, I can’t completely separate my emotions from it. In most cases, I think of my work as just trying to find the answer.

“It isn’t unusual. I don’t think there was any reason for her to commit suicide right now, though. At least, the suicide note didn’t seem to be hinting towards one… Perhaps it just

seemed that way. She might have gotten into some kind of trouble, like she made a medical error or something." Yamaji-kun says unpleasantly. He doesn't want to admit that it was likely suicide, not murder. "Or… Could she have been murdered to hide something evil?"

"There's always that possibility."

"Like a member of the medical staff murdered her to hide a malpractice case or something?"

I know he's being serious, but I can't help cracking a smile.

"Professor!"

"Sorry. Though I wonder what kind of mistake is worth committing such a risky crime. If the hospital's negligence is clear, it would be taken to court. Even though it seems unreasonable, a patient's chance of winning a malpractice lawsuit is only 20%. Is there any benefit to the hospital to kill a staff member just to keep them quiet?"

"It could be… For the hospital's reputation… or something."

"Rumours only last for 75 days. After everyone finished talking about it, they forget." I say in a slightly rude tone.

His words just sound funny to me. Yamaji-kun tightens his lips in anger. He looks away from me in shame of his feelings, due to his sense of justice.

"You said that there was a note left behind, right?"

He responds after taking a deep breath. "Yeah." He responds with the same tone as a boy who was scolded by his teacher.

It's kind of nice how clearly he shows his emotions, like a child. Though at the same time, being so straightforward can be dangerous, if he shows his unease. When passing justice, or doing the right thing, there is no equal.

"Since there was a note, it was determined that there's no doubt that it was suicide." Yamaji-kun says with a disgusted expression.

"Right.. In Japan suicide notes are often heavily taken into consideration, but in some countries corpses with a note are the most suspected of foul play."

"Even if it was done on a computer, not handwritten?"

I want to say anything can be forged. That's certainly true. However, partial hangings aren't generally used to cover up a murder. It can't be helped, so I prepare myself and review the photos of the incident again. He won't go home until he's convinced. He can be troublesome, but at the end of the day, I don't dislike him.

I take a loupe out of my chest pocket and begin examining the photos of the scene closely. Suddenly, I get a familiar, uncomfortable feeling about the neck where the head has fallen.

"I see… If I had to say something, I'd mention the neck bones."

"The neck? What about it?"

"Yeah. By the look of it, it seems like the first and second cervical vertebrae have been cut off. Of course it could be a coincidence, but it appears to have been cut by someone with knowledge of human anatomy."

"It was intentional?!" Yamaji-kun leans forward.

The secretary, who has just returned with a tray, clicks her tongue.

“Hold on, I can’t say anything definite. At best you could call this is… a reference point. Of course I can’t deny the possibility that they fell off naturally.” I hurriedly wave my hands in front of my face.

He slumps down in his chair and buries his face in his hands. He lets out a disappointed sigh. He’s always very expressive with his emotions.

I turn to face the computer while I explain. Aoba-kun seems to have returned at some point, I invite him to pull a chair up next to the desk.

“Listen up. In most cases when a head is cut off, the cut is usually on the fifth or sixth cervical vertebra – usually, the adam’s apple is cut. That could be something like a guillotine. It takes a lot of work. In the Edo period, it’s said that people started to decapitate others by cutting the cartilage between the skull and first vertebra. That’s because if you have a good blade, you’ll be able to cut the neck without hitting any bones.”

Aoba-kun loosens his shirt collar, exposing his neck for Yamaji-kun to see during the explanation. I point out the adam’s apple and the vertebrae on his neck to Yamaji-kun.

“So in this case… You’re saying that it isn’t exactly easy to cut the neck like the corpse in this picture.”

Aoba-kun lowers his head so I can point out the occipital condyle to Yamaji-kun.

“The neck on this particular corpse was cut around the first and second cervical vertebrae. The connection between the two bones… For most methods, you’d see a defect in the odontoid process. The coroner always checks this part, so if there’s damage, they can’t say it wasn’t a crime… So we can guess there was no damage to that bone.”

Yamaji-kun writes in his notepad with a confused but eager expression. It’s just like teaching my students, going one step at a time.

“In a case where a person was hanged, the protrusions on the axis would break. However, if someone wanted to cover up a murder, they could take a sharp object and break the bone themselves once the body started to decompose. So if this really was a case of murder, the criminal would have to be someone who is familiar with the human body. But that’s only when it’s already rotting. It would stink, too. The smell of a rotting brain is unbearable for most. That’s why I think it’s better to focus on the possibility that the corpse fell like that by chance.” I thank Aoba-kun while Yamaji-kun turns away. “That’s all I can say… Sorry I can’t do much.”

He lifts his head. His eyes are shining with excitement. “…Can I ask you for one more thing?” I already know what he’s going to say from just the look in his eyes.

“Yamaji-kun, I’m just a university professor. I really can’t help you more than this.”

“Yeah, I know that. I still want to ask you to look at the remains directly! You might understand something from it.”

“Don’t ask me something so ridiculous!” I raise my voice.

“I’m not trying to be ridiculous! There’s nobody else I can ask except for you! Please!”

A thick silence flows through the room. My secretary glares at me, like it’s my fault she can’t go home early. When my eyes meet Aoba-kun’s, he silently shakes his head.

“Yamaji-kun… I really admire your enthusiasm. Knowing that there’s even just one young detective with your passion in this city is reassuring. It’s true that everyone has things they can and can’t do, but I think everything would be a little better if everyone could understand as much as you do.”

"…I understand."

I don't want to put a damper on his enthusiasm, but I also don't want him to think I'm looking down on him. No, maybe I just don't want to turn away the expectations and trust he has for me. Either way, I don't want to reject him thoughtlessly. I wanted to choose my words carefully, but I ended up talking to him like he's another one of my students. My words are enough for him to understand that I'm turning his request down. Seeing his expression so full of disappointment makes me feel regretful.

"I'm really sorry… I can't help you with this… But if I think of anything else, I'll let you know right away." Yamaji-kun doesn't respond to my apology. Still looking disappointed, he bows and leaves the room without looking back.

"Next time he comes here, do you want to avoid talking with him directly?" My secretary asks grumpily.

"No…" I give a vague response.

I don't want to let him leave like this, but I also don't want to get involved. This isn't part of my job, and it's outside the scope of his territory, too.

"He doesn't seem like a bad person. Isn't it a good thing to give some advice when you're not too busy teaching?" Aoba-kun says with a wry smile.

I watch Yamaji-kun from the doorway. Eventually he turns down the hallway towards the elevator. I can see his expression for just a moment. He doesn't look like he's calmed down yet. I run down the stairs that are near the library. I'm out of shape, so I start breathing heavily. I finally reach the first floor just as Yamaji-kun is reaching the exit. I hurry over to him and grab his arm. His eyes open wide with surprise.

"Wait! I forgot to say something to you."

"…What is it?"

"The sphenoid bone… The corpse was missing the sphenoid bone."

Yamaji-kun's expression stiffens. "Sphenoid…"

"I actually investigated a similar corpse once before. The body was found too late, so it was already mostly turned to bone. The case was ruled to be a suicide. But the body in that case was found in the middle of the mountains, and the skull was missing the sphenoid bone. It just wasn't there. The beautiful, white butterfly inside that person's head was missing." I tell Yamaji-kun while still breathing heavily. He doesn't seem to understand what I'm talking about. "We still don't know the identity of that corpse, and as more time passes, the corpse will keep decaying. So for one day-"

"Professor?"

"I'll cooperate with you for one day. But it has to be now. I'll never cooperate with you like this again. This is a once in a lifetime exception."

Yamaji-kun's eyes shine, his expression full of anticipation. I'm worried he doesn't really understand what I'm saying, but I decided it would be a mistake to send him home, so I decided to trust my intuition.

I'm happy I get to accompany Sakurako-san. Honestly, I think I'd be too worried if I let Sakurako-san go with just Shouko-san.

"I just don't know how to talk to that girl," my mom said. Shouko-san manages to get permission from her for me.

Fortunately, the room is a maisonette, so there's two bedrooms. It seems I don't have to worry about it anymore, or have another room prepared. The next day, Saturday, I went to a large shopping centre in Midorimachi with my mom. My mom didn't refuse to let me go with Sakurako-san. However, instead she said, "then please try to look a little neater," and bought me new clothes and underwear.

Clothes aside, I don't understand my mom's idea of "if you go to a hot spring, you'll be embarrassed if you aren't wearing new underwear." I'd honestly like to choose my own clothes as much as I can, so I try to speak out from the sidelines, but apparently my mom overrules my judgement. In the end, I'm chased away and forced to go to the bookstore.

The bright, open interior feels so nice that I end up humming without thinking about it. I grab a few new books I wanted, and line up at the register… but I end up walking over the travel magazine corner next to the register instead. There's a variety of magazines about Hakodate, but they're all just famous tourism spots. Speaking of tourism magazines, most of them tend to lump Furano, Biei, and Asahikawa together, even though there's a big difference. Though I'm attracted to the title that says "nice, hidden spots," since I haven't visited much, I'd like to visit the major attractions first. While I'm looking, I suddenly feel someone pull on the sleeve of my parka.

"Are you going on a trip over the winter break?"

"Huh…? Oh, Kougami."

I turn around to see Kougami standing beside me. She's wearing a fashionable white knit coat, and jeans. Since they're skinny jeans, I can clearly see the outline of her beautiful legs.

"Just a short trip to Hakodate."

"Hakodate?" She picks up a similar guidebook to the one I'm holding, and starts flipping through it.

"Yeah. Over Christmas… Speaking of which, what did you do with Imai?"

"What did we do?" She replies in a strangely displeased tone. Judging from her response, I guess he never confessed to her. Since he never messaged me back, I figured that was the case. Honestly, it was such a great opportunity, too.

"Oh, I was just wondering if you had fun when you went for tea together. That's all. What shop did you go to? The same one as usual?"

"No, we went to a hamburger place in the power centre. The one near the pachinko place."

"Oh…" He could have at least gone somewhere nicer, with a better atmosphere.

"Hakodate sounds nice, though! I've seen on TV that Hakodate is all lit up around Christmas time."

"I've seen that, too." I'm looking forward to it. Every time I go to Hakodate, I want to get another nice memory.

"So you won't be in town for Christmas?

“No, I won’t. Since Ariwara-san suddenly had work come up, I decided to accompany Sakurako-san and Shouko-san.”

Kougami responds by saying, “aww,” in a dissatisfied voice.

“What?”

“It’s just… It’s always just you, Tatewaki-kun. I want to go on an outing with Sakurako-san, too. It’s not fair that it’s only ever you!”

“It’s not really… is it really that fun to hang out with her?”

Anyway, even if they did go out together, there’s a high chance of running into a dead body. Kougami seems to be pouting for some reason, and stares at her guide book with a wrinkled brow. Soon, she stops abruptly on a page and says “this seems good.”

“For what?”

“A souvenir. If you forget, I’m never talking to you again, Tatewaki-kun,” She says, and turns away from me.

“Huh? You didn’t need to tell me that, of course I’ll buy souvenirs like I should.”

I wasn’t actually planning to, but since I mentioned I’m going to Hakodate, it would be rude not to. I give a strained smile.

“Then buy me this lovely music box at the Kanemori warehouse.”

“What… I can’t just get you squid senbei?”

I don’t know how much it costs, but it’s definitely over my budget. A music box can’t be cheap.

“You can’t.” Rather than listen to my suggestion, she insists on an expensive gift.

Hokkaido is vast. It’s about 80,000 square kilometres, which is approximately 20% Japan. Honestly, just the numbers don’t do it justice. I think you can only really feel how big Hokkaido really is when you’re out on a trip like this.

Although we could have gone by plane or railway (especially since Hakodate and Asahikawa have airports nearby), Sakurako-san stubbornly wants to go by car. The reason she gave was that it’s better to have a car to move around the city. However, if it’s just for travelling around the city, we could have rented a car. Shouko-san disapproves once she realizes that Sakurako-san actually just wants to pick up animal carcasses she drives past. She tries to argue back saying that she’ll be the one driving anyway, but Shouko-san suggests taking a plane.

I personally think it’ll be easier to investigate the case while keeping it a secret from Shouko-san if we take a car, so, I’m not opposed to going in Sakurako-san’s car. I want to offer to go by plane too, but I’m worried about Sakurako-san driving a long distance by herself. Even though we’re driving along the highway, it still takes over 7 hours to make the 430km trip.

The stops we made along the way were a lot of fun, though. My stomach hurt a bit from all the food I ate at the service area. The zangi, the cheesecake, and not to mention the ageimo. The soft and fluffy potatoes inside the sweet, yet slightly salty outside are delicious. The potatoes in winter have a higher sugar level, so they’re sweeter. They’re kita akari potatoes, so they’re soft and melt in your mouth. The hotdogs were delicious, too, but having just one sausage just isn’t satisfying enough for me.

I'm sleepy from overeating, but thanks to the sound of Sakurako-san car stereo, I can't fall asleep. Along the way, Sakurako-san changes the song to "DOKURO," a song that's been made popular by children's TV shows lately. I hoped this would lead to a new trend for her, but the title deceived me. It's an eerie song, but somehow still makes me want to hum along with it's light rhythm. It's a song about the 23 bones in the skull, a perfect fit for Sakurako-san.

As the driver, Sakurako-san has the special privilege of picking what songs play in the car. After listening to this song for 7 hours on repeat, I think I might finally remember all the bones in the skull. The smallest bone in the human body is in the ear, it's called the stapes. Thanks to the music, though, Sakurako-san is still in a good mood despite being tired from driving for so long.

There wasn't a lot of conversation during the drive, but it didn't bother me much. Well, since my grandma on my mom's side lives in Wakkanai, I'm used to long car rides.

"There really isn't any snow here, just like I heard!"

"Asahikawa hasn't gotten much snow this year, but looking at the bare roads like this, you really notice how big Hokkaido is," Shouko-san says, holding a cup of coffee while we pick her up at the airport. It seems like she was thinking the same thing as me.

I didn't notice during the car ride, but the scenery here is so different from Asahikawa, where the snow is starting to pile up.

Shouko-san is drinking black coffee. I thought she wouldn't like it, like Sakurako-san.

When we stop at Hakodate station on the way, I buy some peach juice with pulp. It's been a while since I've been to Hakodate station. The glass is just as beautiful as ever. However, it doesn't beat the building at Asahikawa station. But still, everything in Hakodate has a certain air to it. The road is one example. The geometric patterns drawn by the power lines overhead gives the sense that the sky is closed off, unlike in Asahikawa. It reminds me of the obvious fact that this city was "made by human hands." This city has a history with the sky.

The dark, calm cityscape somehow pairs nicely with Sakurako-san's chocolate-coloured car. Winter wraps around us like a blanket, and the shadows are soft and gentle. With the cityscape streaming past the car like this, it almost feels like I'm in a different country. However, as the car approaches Yuno river, the townscape changes to be characteristic of the seaside. I can smell the ocean in the wind.

While counting the seagulls flying in the cold sky, we finally reach the hotel. It's a sightseeing hotel run by Shouko-san's family, the Toudou group. When the car stops, the hotel's manager greets us by saying, "we've been expecting you."

"Wow…"

The exterior doesn't change from the rest of Hakodate's scenery at all. I thought it looked like an older building at first, but that changes completely when we go inside. I wonder if this is one of those designer hotels I've heard about. The monotone coloured walls, the gentle lighting, the high ceilings, the sparkling floors… It's completely different from the hot springs inns I've seen before.

Shouko-san married into the family that owns this place. Because of that, we can skip past checking in and everything, and just go directly to our room. The hallways are so spacious and feel so freeing, but I can't calm down at all.

"Woah…"

It's really a maisonette style room. I accidentally let my excitement escape. There's even a spiral staircase in here.

"This is… Amazing…"

There's an expensive looking table, a really nice couch that smells like leather, a soft carpet, and a huge TV with a DVD player and a stereo.

"Oh!"

There's a bouquet of beautiful roses on the table. Shouko-san's really happy about it. There's a message from Ariwara-san under the vase. It's an apology, since he can't be here. I didn't bother counting, but I think there's the same number of roses to match Shouko-san's age. Her birthday is on Christmas, after all. She's truly delighted about it. Ariwara-san seems like he's always doing special things like this.

"Shou-chan, you can use the bedroom on the second floor." Shouko-san says happily, as I climb the stairs.

There's a bedroom and a bathroom up there. I decide to check out my bedroom first. The semi-double bed seems a bit too big for just me alone. I wonder why fancy beds like this always have a cushion behind the pillows? What are they supposed to be used for? The ones here are even cylindrical.

I try sitting down on the bed. It's so soft that I feel like I'd fall right asleep if I were to lay down right now. My whole body feels tired, and I just want to go to sleep. I hear Shouko-san walking over, so I jump to my feet.

"The bath is huge, isn't it?"

It seems like she came to see the bath. The soap and shampoo seem to be an expensive French brand. The whole room is about 3 times the size of the one at my house. I can smell the hot water. The bath water comes from a natural spring.

Speaking of hot springs, one of my favourites is near Sounkyo. The hot springs here in Hakodate smells different from there, though. It's hard to explain… It smells kind of like a nice, fluffy futon that's been laying in the sun all day.

"This room, and the bath… This place is so extravagant."

"Wanna get in together?" Shouko-san says with a mischievous smile.

"Huh?!"

My heart jumps into my throat in an instant. Just the thought is embarrassing enough to make my face turn red.

"Aw, is your face all red because of an old woman like me?" She laughs. I turn away and sulk.

"I don't think you really think of yourself as old, though."

"Hohoho"

I respond grumpily to her teasing. Shouko-san laughs. She nudges me with her elbow. As expected of Shouko-san.

It seems there's a large public bath in the building, so I don't think I'll use the bath in the room. When I return to the living room, Sakurako-san seems tired, and has her legs stretched out on the couch.

"Get changed, we're leaving."

"Right now?"

“Yes, even though I wanted to rest a little.”

“It must be nice to be young,” Shouko-san says as she turns back toward her room.

Sakurako-san urges Shouko-san to go into the bedroom. Somehow, I also end up going back to my room. That said, I don’t think I really need to change my clothes. I end up rustling around in my bag, then immediately going back downstairs.

There’s a tea set prepared, along with a coffee maker, coffee beans, and a manual grinder. I want to try it out. I put the beans in, and turn the handle. Soon, it starts to smell nice in response to my efforts. Sakurako-san said that a component in coffee’s scent is the same as the scent of a corpse, but it doesn’t seem comparable to a putrid corpse at all.

Since this is my first time grinding coffee beans by hand, I don’t know how much to put in the grinder. I accidentally put too much in, and bean skins and powder start spilling out of it. The powder immediately covers everything around me. Just then, Sakurako-san comes back into the room and starts laughing loudly.

“You should ask if you haven’t used one before.”

She tells me the cleaning is best left to the hotel staff, and hands me one of the two bottles of mineral water she takes out of the fridge. I drink a mouthful of water while looking at Sakurako-san, who is wearing makeup. Silence flows around us as we sit in the living room, facing each other. Kougami might find it awkward, but I don’t really mind sitting in silence with Sakurako-san. During times like this, Sakurako-san is usually in her own little world, and can’t even see me. So, I can look at her without worrying. Her long eyelashes, her cute mole.

However, recently I’ve felt uncomfortable. Is it really okay for me to be here right now? I feel anxious about it. It reminds me of how out of place I felt when we first met.

“…Is it really okay for me to go with you?” Eventually, I come out and say it. I can’t help but ask. What she said when she wanted to part ways still cuts into my heart.

“I don’t hate being with you or anything. I’m just… thinking about what’s best for you. If something were to happen to you… It makes me anxious.”

It seems like she understood the worry in my question. She responds with a downcast look. “Memento Mori – remember death. Death is always following me.” She mutters, sounding somehow lonely. “…However, this time, it’s best that Naoe isn’t here. Ever since we found that skeleton by that dilapidated house, I’ve been wanting to investigate this case. I’m glad that you’re accompanying me.”

Ariwara-san’s absence must be convenient for her, since he definitely wouldn’t agree with all this. Even though it would leave things half-finished, Ariwara-san wouldn’t want Sakurako-san to do anything dangerous. He’d rather keep her locked up, to keep her safe.

‘Death is always following me,’ she said. Ariwara-san would worry if he knew about all the unfortunate events that seem to happen around Sakurako-san. I’m supposed to keep it a secret, but I always feel guilty about it. He’d be disappointed in me if he knew what we were doing. I want to become a man like Ariwara-san. I don’t want to betray or disappoint him, but Sakurako-san told me not to tell anyone. There’s no way for me to stop her. I’ll just have to protect her in Ariwara-san’s stead. I firm up my resolve. There’s no other option.

“Well, should we get going soon?”

We have to strike while the iron is hot. I stand up, full of determination, and stretch out a hand to Sakurako-san.

File-2

Since Yamaji-kun has the day off, and I don't have any lectures, we head to Hakodate. We visit the parents of the deceased Hiyori Usubuchi, but since they're still in a state of profound grief, they aren't welcoming towards a forensic scientist. The father seems like a strict person, who doesn't have very strong familial relations. From the beginning until the end of our meeting, the atmosphere is awkward. The mother in particular seems to be under a lot of stress. There's no doubt that the ticks she has, like her eyes twitching, are symptoms of such.

When I asked the father if we could see the remains, he declined and asked us to leave. Yamaji-kun has already been struggling with the father's negativity, but when he's asked about his daughter's death, he changes his tune and refuses to talk.

I drink some coffee, but it doesn't leave me feeling refreshed at all. Eventually, we get in contact with the deceased's sister, a woman named Satsuki. Since the parents are out now, we can check the remains. Yamaji-kun hurries to enter the house.

Satsuki-kun seems to agree that her sister's death is suspicious. Since she also wants to know the truth, she kindly offers her cooperation. It sounds like her father is constantly blaming her for not noticing anything strange about her sister. Since both the parents are out, I ask to see the remains. Unfortunately, there isn't much to gather from cremated ashes.

In search of other clues, Satsuki-kun takes us to the apartment where the two of them lived. Her room is exactly the way she last left it.

"I didn't want to get rid of anything," Satsuki-kun says.

Since it would be too painful for her to do it herself, I recommend her to get a specialist to handle it. She hasn't touched her sister's computer in a long time. I want to check if there's a last will, or any other clues on it, but the account is locked. We try to log in, but not even Satsuki-kun knows the password.

We try every word we can think of, birthdates, and anniversaries, but we can't figure it out. We decided to pay her boyfriend a visit tomorrow. Before dinner, I try to call Sakurako to see what she's up to, but it seems she's sulking about being left behind. She hangs up after saying only a few words.

Relying on Shitara-ojisan's files, we leave the hotel and head to the Usubuchi's house, where the bereaved family lives. It seems that the ferry terminal in Hokuto city, which is close to Hakodate, is quite far from the hotel. I can't say exactly how far it was since I fell asleep on the way. Sakurako-san seems a bit grumpy when we're getting out of the car because of it. She might just be nervous, though. Since she wants to find the criminal at any cost, I can feel her drive, and it's making me tense as well.

"…Huh?"

When we approach the house, I notice that the nameplate next to the door doesn't say Usubuchi-san.

"Ebisu…? Please wait. Isn't the nameplate different? It doesn't say Usubuchi-san, right?" I take my hand away from the intercom and look up at Sakurako-san. However, Sakurako-san pushes the button without hesitation. We can hear the muffled doorbell ringing inside. Twice. Thrice. In the end, no matter how many times Sakurako-san rings it, there's no response.

It seems they aren't home. It can't be helped, so we head back to the car. Just then, a woman who appears to have just gotten back from shopping parks in front of the neighbouring house, and looks at us strangely.

"Um, excuse me."

I don't want her to think we're suspicious, so I rush over to her. She's probably a bit older than my mom. She's slim, wearing glasses, and looks nervous.

"I'd like to ask you, does Usubuchi-san live in this house, by any chance?"

"Usubuchi-san left a few years ago," The neighbour woman says without looking at me while she closes her car door and locks it.

"Huh?"

"Since it was just the younger daughter left, they sold the house and moved away."

"The younger daughter… You mean… Satsuki-san, right?"

"That's right, Satsuki-chan." The woman lifts her head. Although she doesn't know who I am, finding out that I know Satsuki-san causes her to relax her guard and loosen up a little. "After Hiyori-chan died, the mother and father followed soon after. I don't think she could handle living alone anymore."

"Do you know where she lives now?"

"No, sorry… But is there something wrong with Satsuki-chan?"

"Huh? Oh, well… She helped out a family member a while ago, so since we were here, we thought we'd come say hi."

"I see, that does sound like Satsuki-chan."

I'm not completely lying, and she seems to believe it well enough. She's starting to tear up behind her glasses. I feel a sting of guilt in my chest.

"Her mother was quite a frail person, and her father was strict, but you can tell even at a glance that Satsuki-chan is a strong girl. She always worked her hardest to support her mother."

"Why did her parents pass away? Were they sick?"

"Yes, her father was. In winter of the year that Hiyori-chan died, he suddenly suffered a subarachnoid hemorrhage. Since she lost two people dear to her in a row, the mother… she became completely depressed…"

"Was it suicide?" Sakurako-san says impolitely, after listening silently for so long.

"No, I was told it was an accident. Though she did suffer from a psychosomatic disease, so things were difficult for her…" The woman is taken aback by Sakurako-san's question for a moment, but then responds in a hoarse voice. "That house was full of so many memories, both happy and sad… All the items left inside have been disposed of by a contractor, though. When I went to greet the contractor, everything was so barren that I couldn't look."

"I see…"

The woman seems to have a lot of compassion for Satsuki-san. Her eyes are watering, and her voice is choked up. Just as she's about to start telling me another story, I notice that Sakurako-san has already gotten into her car, so I hurriedly thank the woman and return to the car.

"If you meet Satsuki-chan, tell her that I'm worried about her!" The woman calls out after us. I turn back and nod to her.

"…Since it's new, everything will be gone."

I sink into my seat and let out a deep sigh.

"Oh well. For now, let's focus on what we already know."

"Can we contact this detective?" I say, searching through the scattered file. Sakuako-san shakes her head.

"Unfortunately, the address has already been changed." The phone number and email address in the file no longer work.

"We can't ask the police or your uncle… What if we ask Ariwara-san?"

"Don't say such foolish things. If we do that, he'll know I'm investigating this incident," she says, sounding displeased.

"Oh, that's right." I forgot that it's a secret that we're investigating this case. "What should we do, then?"

"Let's visit this Hiyori woman's boyfriend, who's mentioned in the file. That person still lives in the same place."

This summer makes it 10 years since Hiyori Usubuchi-san died. The passage of time has become an obstacle that is now standing in our way. First of all, we want to meet with Satsuki-san and have a quick chat with her. Of course, she'd want to know why Sakurako-san and I have come to visit. How are we supposed to explain that? I'm honestly a bit happy that it's been put off for now. However, it's still troubling that the path to seeing her has been cut off.

In search of clues, I search through a file full of handwritten notes left by Sakurako-san's uncle. It seems like it's similar to a diary. His slightly slanted, neat handwriting looks like the kind of writing someone with a serious personality would have. I spend the drive reading all these notes. A man named Yamaji-san, who is mentioned in the notes, is described as being young and enthusiastic.

I suddenly remember the police officer named Yamaji that I met in Mashike. I wonder if he's doing well? Of course, the Yamaji-san mentioned here and the Yamaji-san I know are different people. However, I somehow feel attached to the Yamaji-san I'm reading about. It's not a very common surname, so maybe they're relatives, or something?

I have nothing to lose by trying, so I decide to call Yamaji-san. I don't talk to him much, our most recent message to each other was me sending a thank you email for the sea lion bones in Sakurako-san's stead. He didn't answer the phone, so he's probably working. I decide to try sending an inoffensive email to him. I ask him to contact me when he sees it.

Hiyori Usubuchi-san's younger sister, Satsuki-san, seems to be a quiet, thoughtful person. However, the neighbour woman said she's a very strong woman. Satsuki-san seems to have been living in an apartment with Hiyori-san. She couldn't believe that her sister had died so suddenly, and she blamed herself. People who truly want to die won't tell those who might help them – Sakurako-san said those words before. It seems that Yamaji-san also hoped that

Hiyori-san's death was a murder. At least if you know who the criminal is, you can direct your hatred to someone else.

Whether or not Sakurako-san's uncle sympathized with his thoughts isn't clear from the file. However, there's one phrase that's written in bold letters – "profound grief".

"…What kind of person is your uncle?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've never met him, and you talk about him from time to time, so…"

"…A magnificent person." Sakurako-san doesn't answer my question right away.

Thinking she doesn't want to talk about it, I close the file. She then opens her mouth to speak. Apparently she was just thinking about how to say it. In that moment of silence, I begin to understand just how deeply Sakurako-san respects her uncle.

"I think he's a little like me. His fingers are dexterous, but he's not so skilled in the ways of life. So, he was a forensic science professor at a university until just before he was hospitalized. I think he really could hear the voices of the dead."

"Voices of the dead…" I stare at Sakurako-san. I'm certain she can hear them, too.

Before long, we arrive at Kikyou, where Hiyori-san's boyfriend at the time lives. Since it's a newer residential area, the houses stand out. I'm a little nervous. When we reach the apartment where the boyfriend lives, we find that he used to live there, but he'd moved. However, someone from the same apartment building helps us out by letting us know that he built a house not far from here after his wife gave birth.

The house is just around the corner from the park, so we don't need to use the car's navigation system. The house has a pretty contrast between the soft, white and brown walls, and the red pavement. There's a man standing in the yard, shovelling snow. When the car stops in front of his house, the man gives us a puzzled look. He's wearing jeans, and a coat with a sports logo on it.

"Excuse us." I call out from the car.

"…What is it?" He forces a smile, but he clearly has his guard up. He checks the license plate on the car and sees it's from Asahikawa.

"Well… We came here because we have something to ask you about. Do you have some time right now?"

"Haa…" He looks over to his front door.

He definitely thinks we're suspicious… I wonder if he's worried about his family? I quickly tell him, "we're not anyone suspicious." Perhaps this is the person we're looking for.

"Right now… We're investigating a certain case. Do you know a woman named Hiyori Usubuchi, who died around 10 years ago?"

"Hiyori…"

"Are you Atsushi Taguchi, who she was acquainted with while she was alive?" I move right to asking if he was her boyfriend. He might still have feelings for her. We tell him about how we tried to visit her family. I hope it's not too painful for him to listen to.

"…Why are you asking about that person now, after such a long time?" This man, Taguchi, scowls at us as if he's truly upset that we're asking about her after all this time.

"Huh? Oh… We're personally investigating this case because we suspect that she may not have committed suicide."

“You are? Why?”

“Well…” While I try to answer his questions, I hear Sakurako-san closing the car door.

“Before, a forensic pathology professor named Shitara visited you with a detective. I’m Kujo, his niece. Professor Shitara is currently unable to engage with this incident due to illness. Therefore, we are investigating on his behalf. We would like you to explain what happened to your former partner again,” Sakurako-san says clearly. Taguchi-san nods.

He’s trembling. “Wait, please be quiet, my wife doesn’t know about Hiyori,” Taguchi-san mutters so quietly that it’s hard to hear him. “I pretty much… said everything I know 10 years ago.”

“You must have been surprised when the police suddenly showed up.”

“Huh?”

“Even if they have nothing to hide, many people feel unnecessarily stressed when they hear the word ‘detective’. Surely you wouldn’t have been able to tell them everything. There’s things you can only remember later after you’ve calmed down.”

“…” Taguchi-san falls silent after hearing Sakurako-san’s words. Perhaps a memory suddenly resurfaced. After a few dozen seconds of silence, he grumbles “I give up…”

“Your cooperation is appreciated,” Sakurako-san says firmly. He says “please wait a minute,” and opens the front door to speak with his wife.

I hear him explaining to his wife that someone got lost while looking for a nearby house. Through the crack between the door and the frame, I can see his wife is wearing an apron, has a large stomach, and there’s a small child standing by her feet. I feel like I caught a glimpse of the life that this man wants to protect. From the bottom of my heart, I feel like he couldn’t have killed Hiyori-san.

“Please keep this short so my wife doesn’t get suspicious,” Taguchi-san says quietly when he returns.

We climb into the car, and go to a spot that can’t be seen from Taguchi-san’s house. I move from the passenger seat to the back seat to make it easier for Taguchi-san to explain. Then, he climbs out of the car. He’s still cautious of us. Maybe it’s because I can’t fully rule out him being the one who killed Hiyori-san, but I feel like it’s better if we stand on the sidewalk rather than enclosed in the car with him.

“I want you to tell me about the woman called Hiyori,” Sakurako-san asks from the driver’s seat, without getting out of the car.

I see Taguchi-san grimace for a moment when she says “woman”. I hurriedly start talking.

“Um… what kind of person was she? It’s okay, even if you say the same thing you told the detective before.”

“What kind… First of all, it’s annoying to be called that person’s boyfriend when she’s already dead. I broke up with that person before she committed suicide.” Taguchi-san sighs and turns away.

“That’s… About when did you split up?”

“It was about 10 days before she went missing. But, as I told the detective, it’s unrelated to her suicide. If I knew she were going to commit suicide after, I wouldn’t have broken up with her,” Taguchi-san says in a strong voice. “That person was frank and daring, in a good way…

Anyway, she was a woman without any delicate aspects." He hesitates for a moment, then lets out a long, bitter sigh. "…I don't want to speak poorly of a dead person, but to be clear, she was selfish and shameless… interacting with her would wear me out. Financially, too."

"Then, that's why you split up?"

In response to my question, he puts his finger on his temple and thinks for a moment.

"Of course it's because she was like that… Is what I'd like to say. But the number one reason is because of her affair."

Sakurako-san stares down at the steering wheel in boredom, uninterested in things like relationships.

"I was told that he was her ex, but I was suspicious of him. She would tell me she was sleeping over at the hospital she worked at, and be unusually hard to contact sometimes. Not to mention my best friend."

"Your friend?"

"Yeah. The three of us were drinking, and I fell asleep after getting drunk. When I woke up, I saw the two of them in the bedroom." He doesn't sound like he wants to remember that… He spits out his words like he's disgusted. Even just imagining that situation is terrible. "Since she was like that, I don't have any regrets about breaking up with her. I don't think she had a hard time afterwards, either. She could just go be with another man." He says with a loud sigh.

"Did she have any enemies?"

Taguchi-san suddenly bursts out laughing. It scares me for a minute.

"I can't imagine anyone forgiving her! Honestly… It's easier to believe that someone murdered her. I can't imagine her killing herself. I was told that there were lots of men at her funeral, all crying." He laughs, like what he's saying is completely natural. Suddenly, he lowers his head.

He's wearing blue suede sneakers, which is unthinkable to wear in Asahikawa at this time of year, due to the weather. Since he stopped laughing, silence surrounds us.

"…Well, it was a big shock when she died… Sometimes I wonder why I can live happily with my family, but she had to end up that way. I don't think it's out of hate that I wonder about that." He mutters. "I don't think I could have made Hiyori happy."

"So do you think she chose her death?" Sakurako-san asks promptly.

"I don't know. But I am sure that I wouldn't have been the reason. I don't think I was a very important person to her, in the end." Taguchi-san looks troubled, as if he's thinking about if it could have been his fault, but he shakes his head. "…But, if I hadn't met her, I probably would've ended up being a terrible husband to my wife." Taguchi-san lets out a self-deprecating laugh, and looks up. "Anyway, If Hiyori committed suicide, there must be some other reason. But, I don't know what that reason could have been. No matter how close you've gotten, you can't fully understand another person's feelings."

I look at Sakurako-san. It's true that no matter how much time we spend together, I can't understand what Sakurako-san is thinking. No matter how much I want to understand her.

"So, now I'm trying to understand my wife as much as possible. Soon, our second child will be born… I want to cherish our children. Hiyori's father was a strict person, I don't want to end up like him." Taguchi-san's looks fondly at his new house behind him. "That's all I can say. I haven't been contacted by Hiyori at all since we broke up. If you want to know what happened

to her after, you're better off asking my friend than me," Taguchi-san says, and takes his phone out of his pocket.

I catch a glimpse of his wallpaper for a moment, it's a picture of his child laughing. I'm convinced from the bottom of my heart that this person could never kill someone.

"Well… even though he was a close friend, we haven't met up since then. Still… even if I don't know how he's doing or what he's been up to, I at least know his contact information. His phone number hasn't changed… I think."

He opens the phone book app, and shows me the contact information for the person who used to be his friend. Toshihide Itou… I don't want to take too long, so I just take a picture of his screen.

"Hide… I didn't mention him to the detective."

"Why didn't you mention him?" I ask as I put my phone back in my jacket.

"…I wonder why. Maybe I didn't want to involve him, maybe it's because I didn't want to talk about him… or maybe I didn't want to look like an idiot because I got cheated on."

"Can you tell me what you were doing at the time she disappeared?" Sakurako-san says, as Taguchi-san starts walking away.

"When she disappeared? Just normal stuff. Got up early, went to work, and got home late just like every other day."

"Late, you say?"

"It was only 10 days after we broke up… I'd work a bunch of pointless overtime, then go drinking. After doing that every day, I ran out of people to invite. I ended up inviting my boss, and got a pointless scolding." He says, shrugging his shoulders.

The way he keeps saying 'pointless' seems strange. He was just killing time, but it seems like he remembers that time quite clearly.

I think it's a good thing we visited him. We learned a bit more about Hiyori-san. I believe he really did love her. I think it was painful for him to be questioned so soon after her death, even if they had broken up prior. I don't think there's anything else for us to ask. I wonder if Sakurako-san has anything? We make eye contact, so she shakes her head at me.

I express our thanks, and Sakurako-san gives him a nod. Taguchi-san turns to leave. He turns back to bow to us before walking away, then stops, like he's remembered something.

"Why are you looking into Hiyori now, after so long?"

"…A corpse similar to hers was found in Asahikawa recently."

"Similar… Was the body hanged?"

"We don't know, but we're investigating it."

It seems like he was told that she hanged herself. In Hakodate, they have a custom of cremating the body before the wake. Along with that, if the corpse has already started to decompose, it may be cremated without allowing the bereaved family to see the body.

"I wonder… If she really was murdered…?" Taguchi-san is frozen in place, trembling with surprise.

"Why are you worried about that?"

"Why… because…"

"It's all in the past. Besides, you have an alibi, don't you?" Sakurako-san says suspiciously.

"…I'm not worried because I think I'm going to become a suspect. If you find anything out, please let me know… I hated that woman, but that doesn't mean I think it's okay for her to be murdered. I guess she had some charming aspects to her."

Taguchi-san clenches his teeth. I'm a little surprised to see him this angry about a woman who betrayed him 10 years ago.

"…What did you like about her?"

Taguchi-san scribbles his phone number on the back of a business card and holds it out to me in case we want to contact him again. I ask my question as I take the card from him. He looks down at the ground, and turns away.

"…Her smile."

"Smile…"

"Her smile was the part of her I loved the most."

Reflexively, I look over to Sakurako-san, who is sitting in the driver's seat. From a profile view, she's showing no expression.

"I really hated that woman, I was always frustrated, and when we were fighting just before we broke up, all I could feel was fury. It's strange. When I remember her now, all that comes to mind is her laughing and smiling," Taguchi-san says as he lifts his head. A lonely smile starts to appear on his face.

After parting ways with Taguchi-san at the park, I look at the picture I took on my phone and enter Itou-san's address into the car navigation system. It's in Asahimachi, which is a bit of a way away from here. However, when I look closely, it seems that it's right near the Kanamori warehouse. We still have time, so we decide to visit today.

"I'm getting… a bit tired."

When we stop at a convenience store on the way there, I find squid ink ramune that's only available in Hakodate. I reflexively buy some, and am surprised that it actually doesn't taste weird. I call out to Sakurako-san, who already has her hands on the wheel.

"Is that so? There's still a bit longer from here. You can sleep, if you want."

"But what about you? Aren't you tired from driving this whole time?"

I wish I could drive, too. As soon as I'm eighteen years old, I want to go to driving school right away.

"Asahikawa… If we had a local ramune flavour, what would it be? Maybe ramen, or salted horumon flavour?"

I wanted to have a fun conversation with Sakurako-san, but as usual, she ignores me. I decide to move back to the main topic. If I'm not talking, I'm probably going to fall asleep.

"Hiyori-san sounds… a bit different from what I imagined."

"What were you imagining?"

"When I heard about her suicide, I thought she'd be a bit more… dainty… I understand why her younger sister doesn't want to believe it was suicide."

"Well… We don't have enough information to make any kind of judgement yet. You believe people too easily."

"I wouldn't say that… But still, having an affair with your boyfriend's friend is pretty cruel."

Sakurako-san is driving a bit more cautiously than usual, since she's not familiar with these streets. It's not like she said I'm stupid or anything, but it's still rude to say something like 'you believe people too easily' about me. I stay silent for a while.

As usual, the car is filled with the sound of Diavel and skulls, endlessly repeating. Since I have nothing else to do, I take a peek through some of the files. It seems like Sakurako-san's uncle thought Hiyori-san's death was a suicide the whole time. I still haven't finished reading over all the contents of the files. I want to read it all, and start putting the facts together, but I decide to stop. That's because of the words Sakurako-san had said before. It's best if I don't read all his notes, since it'll give me preconceived notions about the case.

I close the file and look at the scenery from the window. The sky as it turns to dusk, and the snow drops that turn into water when they hit the car window. The trees by the road are different from Asahikawa, they've lost their leaves for the winter.

We don't call Itou-san about our arrival in advance. Since it would be a problem if he refused, so Sakurako-san would rather just visit in person. I think it's annoying for the people we visit, and potentially even dangerous, but it's true that they won't have a chance of getting away from us.

Itou-san lives on the second floor of an apartment building that's really showing its age. We ring the doorbell, then hear a voice calling "I'll be right there!" from inside.

"Umm… We'd like to talk to you about something, if it's not too much trouble." I tell him through the door. He stays silent, probably confused and wary. "I'm sorry that this is so sudden. We're actually here to investigate the suicide of Hiyori Usubuchi-san, who died 10 years ago. If you have a bit of time, could you tell us what you know?"

The silence continues. I look over to Sakurako-san, ready to give up, but she rings the doorbell again. It's her 'ring the doorbell until they come out' strategy. I know where this is going, so I quickly block her.

"Actually… We heard about you from Taguchi-san. Since you knew Usubuchi-san before she died, we thought you might have some information, so-" Before I can finish my sentence, the door opens.

"Can you tell us what you know?" I ask. A slim man with a bitter face looks at me. This is probably Hide; Toshihide Itou. "Can you tell us what you know about Hiyori-san before her death?"

"No, I don't have anything to tell you."

He has black hair that's longer at the back, wears glasses, and seems a bit nervous. I'm surprised by how slender and androgynous he is. Since he had a relationship with his friend's girlfriend, I was expecting more of a smooth talker.

"Anything you remember is fine, even if it's just something small."

"Even if you say that, there's nothing for me to tell you… we were drunk, it was a short lived relationship." He talks quietly so his neighbours don't hear.

"Is… is that so? But, Taguchi-san and Hiyori-san were…"

"I know. When I heard they broke up, I felt like he couldn't keep up with her, anyway." He sighs, and looks behind him into the room. He turns back with a bitter expression, and says, "I guess there's no choice, you can come in."

The room is full of books, games, and computer equipment. He seems like a neat freak, since there's no dust and everything is nicely organized. Even though it's all orderly, since there's so many things here, the room feels small and strangely oppressive.

"…I only have barley tea, is that okay?"

"Oh, it's fine, we won't be here long…" Even though I said he didn't need to, he ignores me and heads to the kitchen anyway.

The apartment seems to have a 1LDK floor plan. The bedroom is separate from the living room. There's a disproportionately large TV in the living room, too. Rather than a couch, there's a big cushion. Sakurako-san squeezes it with a smile. Apparently she likes it.

Still, we're not here to play around, and I don't want Itou-san to see her like that, so I pull her away by her arm. I'm met with an unexpected amount of resistance, then feel my elbow hit something soft. I quickly apologize to her.

The only thing she says back to me is, "it didn't hurt."

For now, I'm just glad she hasn't noticed my accidental misdeed. Sorry, Ariwara-san. I really didn't mean to. I sit quietly, holding my knees, trying to pretend I can't see Sakurako-san hugging the cushion.

Fortunately, Itou-san comes back soon holding a wooden tray with brightly coloured cups on it. When he sees Sakurako-san, he says, "that thing feels nice, doesn't it?" with a smile. Somehow, that makes me feel like he couldn't be a bad person.

"Anyway… You said you were investigating the case with Usubuchi-san?" Itou-san puts a blue and orange cup in front of both of us.

"At the time, they ruled it as a suicide. We think they didn't properly consider all the possibilities." Sakurako-san replies, still hugging her cushion rather than drinking her tea.

"Really?!" Itou-san yells in surprise. His voice sounds like it contains some joy. He covers his face with his hands and slides back a bit. "…This whole time I've thought that… maybe it was my fault that she committed suicide…"

"Why? Is it because she was dumped by her boyfriend?" Sakurako-san asks. Itou-san nods.

Looking at his stunned expression, I feel like I understand how guilty he's felt about Hiyori-san for the past 10 years.

"I see… Even if it wasn't murder, her ex-boyfriend seems to think it was. He wouldn't have left her like that if he thought she was the type of person to commit suicide over a breakup."

"…"

Sakurako-san speaks comfortingly. We wait for a little while while Itou-san settles down. I take a sip of the cold, dark barley tea. It's a little too bitter for me.

"…Sorry. You came here to listen to my side of the story."

After a little while, Itou-san regains his composure, and clears his throat. I don't know how much time has actually passed. There isn't a clock that I can see from where I'm sitting, and I feel like it would be rude to take out my phone. Times like these make me feel like it'd be really useful for me to get a watch. However, I don't think much time has passed. It's just the situation of sitting in silence teaches me how much weight that one minute, even one second, can carry. I think it was probably only a couple of minutes at the most.

“I’d like you to tell us anything you know about that woman.” Starting fresh, Sakurako-san clears her throat and asks Itou-san again.

“…I guess there’s no use crying over spilt milk. Even though I was drunk, what I did that evening can never be taken back. I went to Atsushi’s house to drink, but he ended up getting drunk first.”

Self hatred, self admonition, anger… he blames himself so strongly. Itou-san firmly sets his fist on the table, and squeezes it with his other hand.

“But… it may just sound like an excuse, but her and Atsushi weren’t doing very well, even before that. While I listened to her worries… I gradually started to feel more and more pity for that lonely girl… You know the rest.” Itou-san hangs his head, looking shy and embarrassed. “I don’t know if it was intentional or unconscious, but I think she was good at making men feel that way. She was beautiful… well, I always knew she was charming, but...”

Being alone with an attractive woman - maybe his heart was weak enough to be swayed by that situation. He probably wasn’t thinking rationally, so he ended up doing something stupid. He completely ruined his relationship with his friend just for something like that. But that’s just the reason, not an excuse. After all, that’s something you just absolutely can’t do. Itou-san probably understands that better than anyone. Because of that, I end up not saying anything about it to him.

I nod to show I’m paying attention. That’s something between men. I feel like by looking each other in the eye, I can tell him what he’s thinking without speaking.

“What were you doing around the time she disappeared? Do you have an alibi? I want you to tell me as many details as you can remember.” Sakurako-san, as usual, has no interest in things like romantic relationships, so she asks her questions coldly.

“Details… Well, I spent every day at work back then. I was working in SE at the time, and since there was some trouble, I was in meetings all the time. I only found out later that she’d died… I didn’t go to her funeral… I felt like I didn’t have the right to.” Itou-san says with a troubled expression. “I’m sorry. I really don’t know anything special about her from when she was alive. I didn’t even know her contact information.”

“Sensible things like that aren’t the only things we want to know. We’re interested in intuitive things, too. There’s lots you can tell about someone from sleeping with them. Trivial things are fine, just try to remember something.”

‘There’s things you can only find out by sleeping with someone, rather than using words,’ I feel like I’ve heard that before. I wonder if she really feels that way. Maybe Sakurako-san just doesn’t understand. She doesn’t seem like she really notices the subtleties of peoples’ hearts.

Sakurako-san has a fiancé named Ariwara-san, and the two of them occasionally go on trips together. Sakurako-san even has extra clothes for him at her house, so of course they’re in that kind of relationship…But given the way Sakurako-san is, it’s hard to imagine.

While we wait in silence for Itou-san to remember something, I glance over at Sakurako-san, who is still hugging the cushion.

When we first got to Hakodate, Sakurako-san was wearing her usual jeans. Since Shouko-san made her get changed, she’s now wearing light makeup, and a white dress. She looks more feminine than usual. Her more ladylike appearance is fresh and surprising, but in the

end, she's still Sakurako-san on the inside. She never acts any different, no matter who she's with. Even if the person she's with is Ariwara-san.

"…To tell you the truth, I saw her walking around with another man, even when she was in a relationship with Atsushi."

"Do you know this man?"

"No… but I don't think he was just her father or brother." Itou-san shakes his head.

"Do you remember any traits this man had?"

"It was a long time ago, and I didn't get a very good look at him."

"Even something vague is fine."

Again, Itou-san stares into space while he thinks.

"That's right… I think he was dressed really well. He was wearing a nice suit. He was older than her. Maybe around the age I am now. Somehow, I got the feeling that she was being forced to go along with him."

She was with a man around his thirties? This is the first we've heard of it.

"Sorry, that's really all I know…" Since he can't remember anything else, Itou-san hangs his head toward Sakurako-san. "But, she's always had a lot of male friends. It caused a lot of problems between her and Atsushi. She always said they were just friends, but I don't think Atsushi believed her. But I… I don't think she ever had any feelings for me other than friendship."

I don't know if she understood the meaning of the term "friends", but apparently Itou-san was one. This seems to be the end of our conversation.

"Um… You really think she didn't commit suicide? Did you figure anything out?"

"You'll be notified as soon as we reach a decision." Sakurako-san somewhat reluctantly puts her cushion down, and stands up.

I also hurriedly stand up, and drink the rest of my bitter barley tea in one gulp.

"U-um! Is Atsushi doing well?" Itou-san suddenly asks us while we're leaving the living room.

"…Why are you asking me? You can ask him yourself. You know each other's contact information," Sakurako-san says. Itou-san's face distorts into a sad expression.

"How could I contact him after I betrayed him like that…"

"You don't need to worry. He seems really happy. He's working hard to take care of his wife and child," I panic and tell him.

It seems Itou-san hasn't given up on their friendship yet.

"I see…" Itou-san gives a lonely smile, looking relieved.

Sakurako-san mutters "idiot" and gives me a disgusted look.

"If you're worried, you should just contact him. Are you sure you never want to hear from your best friend again?"

"I know what you mean, but… if he's happy, I don't want to see his wife. I betrayed his trust," Itou-san says with disgust.

"So, what do you say?"

"Huh?"

"Are you going to stay in fear forever just because you made one mistake? Even bones can heal after being broken." Sakurako-san lets out an irritated sigh and turns around.

Itou-san stares in surprise.

“This isn’t the same as a bone!” I grab her arm before she can say anything else. She quickly shakes my hand away.

“If you’re just waiting for someone to forgive you, you’re taking the wrong approach. It’s a better idea to just talk to the other person themselves.”

“I don’t really want to just wait, but I don’t think I could stand meeting him face to-“

Sakurako-san grabs Itou-san’s smartphone from off the TV stand. Without any hesitation, she starts tapping away. Her special talent is that she never forgets a phone number. Then, she finally holds the phone out towards Itou-san. The call button is right there.

“No matter how much you think about it, there’s no point if you never do anything about it. No matter how many times you apologize in your imagination, you’re still a dishonest person until you convey those feelings in reality. You’re not reflecting on your actions, you’re just wallowing in self pity.” Sakurako-san says clearly, pushing the phone towards Itou-san again.

He hesitates, but finally takes the phone and stares down at it with a dumbfounded expression.

“Though in the end, that’s just my opinion… At least Taguchi had put your contact information in his contacts list. He used your nickname, too. Of course, it could have just been transferred with the rest of his data when he changed phones or something. Still, over the last 10 years there would have been countless times for him to erase you from his list. But he didn’t do it. I’m sure there’s a reason for that.” She puts her hand on Itou-san’s shoulder as she passes him to leave.

“Tell him while you still can. Time is limited.” Sakurako-san says, “let’s go, boy,” as she heads towards the doorway.

I hurry after her. Itou-san doesn’t see us off or say goodbye. He just stares at his phone. My own throat tightens from the tension.

“Well… Excuse us.”

Just before I close the door, I see him tap the screen. I don’t know if he closed the app, or if he pressed call. However, I can see for just a moment that he looks like he’s resolved himself.

When I climb into the car, the exhaustion that has built up hits me, so I don’t fasten my seat belt immediately. Meeting and talking with strangers is tiring, especially since it wasn’t exactly a fun topic.

“I… hope he can contact Taguchi-san,” I say while pressing my forehead to the window to cool it down.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s irrelevant to us.” Sakurako-san starts the car, and tells me to put on my seat belt.

Is it really dusk already? Outside, the sun has already set, and the space between the sky and the cityscape is dyed with navy blue and green, without any orange left at all. In less than half an hour it’ll be completely dark.

“Walking together with a man… Taguchi-san did say he thought she was cheating on him. He said he was a doctor at the hospital. What do you think about it?”

”Who knows.” Sakurako-san replies without really listening. She tilts her head to the side. “…You’ve read the entire file now, haven’t you?”

“Huh? I mean, you usually hide things like this. Maybe it would have been better if I didn’t have any preconceived notions, though?”

“I guess so… to you, I can see something invisible. For me, I don’t want to let my feelings toward my uncle get in the way. I’m not as simple as you.”

I don’t really understand what she’s saying, so I don’t know if I’m being praised or made fun of.

“…What should we do? Should we visit someone else?” Sakurako-san’s question brings me back to reality. There’s still some time until dinner at 7pm.

“No… I think we should head back for today.”

Sakurako-san takes a deep breath with a bitter smile. After all, she’s tired, too.

“Ah, then before that, could we go to a store that sells music boxes? If you’re tired, you could wait in the car. Kougami wanted one as a souvenir.”

I don’t know what tomorrow’s schedule will be like, so I don’t know if I’ll have time then. Tomorrow will probably be just as draining as today was. I’m worried that I won’t get any time to go shopping, and I don’t want to be worried for the whole trip, so I decide to ask for a big favour. It’s not far from here, so Sakurako-san doesn’t mind too much.

When I apologize for making her go out of her way for me, she smiles and says, “she’s my acquaintance, too.”

To be honest, the main reason I want to go is to take a break from the depressing atmosphere. I just want to relax, and escape that feeling. I’m only using Kougami as an excuse for my own selfishness.

The Kanamori warehouses aren’t far from Itou-san’s house. Just like Kougami said, the area around the warehouses is covered in lights. The red bricks look great when they’re lit up. It almost looks like something you’d see in Europe. Well, not that I’ve ever been to Europe, or even overseas before.

What surprises me most is the giant lit up tree. It’s a fir tree, around 20 metres tall, from their sister city in Canada. It’s so bright that it’s illuminating the whole surrounding area.

I look at the lights reflected off the surface of the water. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” I say. Even Sakurako-san, who seems to lack human emotions, responds with, “it really is.”

I walk side by side with Sakurako-san, past children and couples. She probably would have liked to stay in the car, but I guess even she needed a change of pace. We walk along without saying anything. After seeing all the other people around us, I wonder what they think the two of us are?

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing.”

I wonder if they see us as lovers with an age gap? They probably do… No, they must think we’re just siblings. After getting confused by all the similar looking warehouses, and getting lost, we finally arrive at the music box store. Somehow, I feel out of place here. But even besides that, I’m starting to worry about my wallet, considering this place seems so fancy.

“Hmmm….”

Just as I thought, music boxes aren’t cheap. Well, there are affordable ones, of course. However, I feel like I want to get her something extra special, to make her even happier. but these things in general are pretty pricey.

“Have you decided yet?”

“Just a minute… I’m trying to pick one within my budget.”

“For Yuriko?”

While I’m trying to decide between something made of porcelain, an accessory case, or a music box, Sakurako-san, who has been walking around the store, comes up and talks to me.

“Yeah, when I said I’m going to Hakodate with you, Kougami was a bit bent out of shape,” I say. Sakurako-san picks up the music box I’m holding.

“Then I’ll buy it.”

“Huh? No, you can’t” I hurriedly try to take it back. “I have to be the one that buys it”

If she finds out that it was Sakurako-san who bought it, she’d probably laugh at me. That would be embarrassing.

“Sakurako-san, if you bought your own souvenir to give Kougami, I’m sure she’d be overjoyed. Kougami really likes you, after all.”

“…She does?” Sakurako-san’s eyes are wide with surprise.

“You didn’t notice?”

It seems like she honestly had no idea. She’s so surprised that she covers her mouth with her hand. Her cheeks turn a bit red. She looks shy about it.

“…I see, in that case, I’ve been speaking to her strangely… But, well, I like Yuriko, too. She’s a kind girl. Gran likes her, too,” Sakurako-san mumbles.

Seeing her flustered like this makes me a little jealous of Kougami. I want to say “I like you, too,” but of course, I’d mean it as a friend. If I said that, would she be happy, or embarrassed? I think about saying it for a moment, but I might regret it, so I don’t.

“Well, whatever. Christmas isn’t for a while, so I’ll splurge.”

Sakurako-san offers to pay half, so I pick the music box I liked the most. I wish I didn’t have to split the cost with Sakurako-san, but I pick out a music box with gold edges, and a white lily motif. Somehow, it feels very Kougami. By the way, the most important part of this music box is that the song is called “The Rose.” Even though it’s kind of ironic that the box has a lily on it rather than a rose, my grandma loved this song, and I do too.

Sakurako-san starts out worrying about what Kougami might like, but eventually decides on a retro-looking kaleidoscope. It’s not the ordinary type you hold in your hand, but one with a lever. I love neat machinery like that, so I’m a little jealous that it’s for Kougami.

Afterwards, we walk around the warehouses for a while to pick out souvenirs for Imai, my mom, and gran. Since I spent so much on Kougami’s gift, I don’t have a lot left over for Imai. I just hope he won’t complain about what I pick. We spend a whole hour looking around at the stores before returning to the car. I hand a 20cm long package to Sakurako-san while she puts on her seatbelt.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for you, Sakurako-san.”

“For me?” She looks surprised.

“It’s a bit early, but it’s a Christmas present.”

She stares at the package in shock for a moment, then shyly takes it and mumbles, “…thank you.”

“Please open it.”

She gently unwraps it, then smiles. “I didn’t realize you’d bought this.”

“It was while you were sampling the cheesecake.”

She happily picks up a glass from the white box. It’s a cup in the shape of a skull. It’s like a shot glass.

“This jaw arch is an Anglo-Saxon type. It’s probably a man. The age… Yes, this is an adult, but not too old.” She happily holds it up above her head.

The glass sparkles from all the lights behind her. It’s a beautiful, but almost surreal, scene. I’m glad she’s so happy with it.

“Oh yeah, Sakurako-san, when’s your birthday?”

This is my first time giving her a present like this. It’s something I’ve been meaning to ask for a long time, so I decide to do it now.

“Mine…? May 23rd.”

“Oh, that’s just after golden week. You really were born in the season of cherry blossoms.”

“On the day I was born, the cherry blossoms that were visible from my grandfather’s room were in full bloom.”

“So that’s why you were named Sakurako-san?”

After she’s done looking at the glass, she gently returns it to the box.

“…What about you?” She suddenly asks me a question once she turns on the car.

“What about me?”

“Your birthday. I’m asking what day you were born.”

“Oh… March 18th. A Pisces, and blood type O, supposedly a romanticist and generous… Though, I guess you don’t believe in things like star signs and all that.”

Sakurako-san mumbles, “I see… However, horoscopes are supposedly based on statistics. They may not be entirely false, though I still don’t believe in fortune telling and the like.”

“That’s what I thought. What’s your star sign, Sakurako-san?”

“Taurus.”

I didn’t think she would know, but she answers after thinking for a moment. I don’t know a whole lot about star signs, so I don’t know what kind of personality a Taurus is supposed to have. I sometimes see the daily horoscopes on the morning news, but I don’t pay a lot of attention to it.

“Well… You don’t like beef, right?”

“How is that related? Is my favourite food supposed to be grass?”

I know she doesn’t eat grass, but she does like sweet dairy products, just like a calf… Anyway, I decide to look up what a Taurus is said to be like on my phone. A diligent student, moody personality, high self confidence, a strong interest in collecting things, good at working with their hands… This sounds like it’s describing her perfectly.

As soon as we arrive back at the hotel, it’s time for dinner. We head from our room to the dining area, where food is carried out to us. It looks like a course of Japanese creative cuisine. The menu is amazing, with all kinds of local vegetables and seafood. Unfortunately, it isn’t squid season, but apparently this is the best time of the year for seafood in Hakodate. Sea urchins

that are roasted in their shells are particularly delicious. Until now, the sea urchin I've tried hasn't been great. This, however, is packed with deliciousness and the scent of the sea.

What's even more impressive is the wagyu beef steak that was aged for a long time at a low temperature. They explained to us that it's a simple steak made with salt and pepper on red meat. The meat has a unique fragrance, almost like roasted almonds. When I bite into it, the flavour overflows from within. The moderate chewiness is enchanting, it's the first time I've ever wanted to chew my food so much. I wish there was gum like this.

The food at high class hotels is delicious, but the portions are small. I think I'm going to be hungry again right away. The steak is cut into small cubes, and four pieces are placed on my plate. I at least wanted a little bit more… When I look down at my plate that was cleared in an instant, Sakurako-san offers me her steak.

"I wouldn't want to be a cannibal," she says, the corners of her mouth curling up into a grin. I offer her the cheesecake from my dessert in exchange for her steak.

Shouko-san gives me her share, too, and says she'll treat me to some delicious steak in Sapporo sometime. I'm excited. I'm really happy after eating such a delicious meal. Sharing a delicious meal with someone is truly blissful. Even after all the bad things that happened, and listening to so many sad stories, you can still enjoy delicious food with your family, friends, and important people. Just having good food is enough to make me feel rich, and want to thank the people in my life. Although there wasn't enough food, my heart is completely full after seeing Sakurako-san so happy with my cheesecake. Her pale skin stands out boldly against the pale orange lighting.

I wonder what the people I met today are doing now. What about Taguchi-san and Itou-san? Where are detective Yamaji and Satsuki-san, who we weren't able to meet yet? I wonder what they're having for dinner… What does Sakurako-san's uncle think about while he's alone in the hospital? He probably doesn't know that Sakurako-san is re-examining Hiyori-san's case. As Sakurako-san said, he would have stopped her if he knew. But when I think about him battling his illness alone… I kind of understand. Even if it makes him angry, Sakurako-san wants to do something for her uncle.

Tomorrow, I'm going to put everything I have into helping her… I silently make a vow in my heart. I'll be sure to earn my steak.

"It feels a little strange. This is kind of nostalgic." After finishing the meal, we have some tea. Shouko-san sips red wine and laughs.

"What is it?"

"Do you remember, Sakurako? That time when you visited Shitara-sensei during the summer in high school."

"Huh…"

I'm surprised. Of course, that's because we were just investigating that case with Hiyori-san today. Did she find out about what we were doing? My heart starts pounding.

"It was right after Akihito-san went abroad. Shitara-sensei was so busy that I had to take care of you. Because of that, he treated me to a meal."

I guess there was nothing to worry about. However, Shouko-san is a strangely sharp person. I have to be more careful.

"Back then, there was a lot going on between me and him."

“A lot?”

“Fufufu... He was always single… Your grandfather and mine both got along well, right? Since Shitara-sensei was single, there was talk about me marrying him.”

“Really…?” That’s the first I’ve heard of it. I’m surprised, but Sakurako-san suddenly laughs.

“I remember the wine.”

“Wine?”

“My uncle. He used to never be interested in getting married. As you can see, Ms. Shouko is a well-bred lady. He thought he didn’t really suit her. That’s why he was always mean to her… She was tilting her wine glass around and talking about sampling wine at a vineyard. There was a ladle used to scoop the wine for you to drink. During autopsies, a very similar ladle is used to scoop fluids out of the body.”

“I see.”

“The fluid in the lungs looks like red wine, too. He was out with his coworkers, and told Ms. Shouko about that when he saw her drinking wine.”

That isn’t… a very good comparison.

“It’s not like I thought Shitara-sensei was bad at first. He was just always so depressing whenever we met. Wasn’t he mean?” Shouko-san says.

I’m surprised, I didn’t think that’s that kind of person Sakurako-san’s uncle is.

“I couldn’t take it anymore so I finally asked ‘do you hate me? Or is it because of the engagement?’. He told me he didn’t want to get married. He wanted to prioritize his work, and put family stuff on the back burner.” The slightly drunk Shouko-san says while tracing the rim of her wine glass with her finger. I see a faint smile appear on her lips. “He should’ve been honest from the beginning if he didn’t want to get married. So, I told my grandfather that Shitara-sensei and I don’t fit well with each other, and I don’t want to marry him.”

“I figured you rejected the offer since he was so rude to you.”

“Oh, that was quite a shock, wasn’t it?”

Soon, she met Akihito-san, and everything turned out alright.

“I’ll never forget that time. I met him for the first time during a boat party in Hakodate. I mentioned that it was my birthday, and the next day the hotel gave me the number of red roses equivalent to my age. Red roses are my birth flower.”

“Then, did Ariwara-san give out roses, too?”

“Fufufu, maybe he did. About a month after the party, talk about me and Akihito-san getting married came up. I thought I was dreaming.” Shouko-san is talking about it so excitedly.

With such lavish sounding words like “boat party” and “roses”, I’m surprised that I’m having dinner with this woman. A year ago, I could never have imagined a world like that. I never thought I’d be happily sitting somewhere like this with Shouko-san and watching Sakurako-san happily eating cheesecake, either.

“…My uncle probably regrets it,” Sakurako-san suddenly says, as she stops eating.

“Huh?”

“My uncle probably regrets rejecting your engagement.” Sakurako-san grins at Shouko-san.

“That’s right, you should bring some roses as a get well soon present, that would make my uncle happy.”

“Oh!”

Shouko-san’s face turns red. “No, no… You think so…? Well, there was one time when you went to Sapporo, I had dinner with him for the first time in a while… It was just for a second, but I thought that if I married him, and you were my niece, it would be a lot of fun,” Shouko-san says bashfully.

She winks at me, telling me to keep that a secret. I hope Akihito-san isn’t listening in from heaven.

“I thought tonight would be fun, but after remembering that… I’m lonely without Akihito-san… but I’m still really happy.”

Her glass rings as she traces her finger around it. It doesn’t sound like she’s just trying to be nice, she really means that. I’m glad to hear that. I’m still feeling a bit left out right now, though, since both of them seem to have forgotten I’m even in the room. I’m basically just a shadow on the wall.

Delicious food makes me happy. That’s the absolute truth. The feeling of fullness after a meal, too. Unfortunately, the gorgeous cooking here wasn’t the best for me in that regard. As I suspected, I get hungry again before going to bed. Sakurako-san walks into the living space after getting out of the bath while I’m eating the cup ramen I bought. Even if the room is warm, it’s still winter, so she might catch a cold like that. I quickly finish my ramen, then start drying her hair with a blow dryer. Normally gran would do this.

“You’re an adult, you should really dry your hair by yourself.”

“Gran likes doing it. It’s not like I make her do it. It can dry on its own, anyway.”

I dry up some of the water that dripped onto the couch. I blow the air on her face for a second.

“It would be bad if you caught a cold.”

“It’s true that the virus is more active at lower temperatures, but you won’t catch a cold just from having wet hair. Though research has shown that having a lower body temperature is linked to a decreased immune response, there’s no direct link between being cold and getting sick.” Sakurako-san uses her breath and her fingers to straighten out her bangs.

“Still, being warm is better than being cold,” I say as I continue to dry her hair.

Brushing her hair reminds me of Hector, somehow. I hope he’s behaving well while we’re away. An older man who lives nearby said he’d take Hector for a walk every morning and evening while we’re gone. Since he’s walking every day in winter for his health anyway, he said he wouldn’t mind bringing Hector along. Still, looking at Sakurako-san’s hair is making me miss how fluffy the adorable Hector is… Now that I think about it, this is the first time I’ve touched her hair.

The mood is so laid back right now, it feels strange. Is this what it’s like to have a pesky older sister? Until now, there’s always been this vague sense of distance between us. Every time I’ve wondered what kind of relationship we have, I never came to a good answer. But, if that answer was ‘like a family’… I think that would make me happy.

Gran is already elderly. She’s lively now, but I’m scared to imagine what might happen 10 or 20 years from now. Sakurako-san is knowledgeable and dexterous, but she doesn’t have

the skill to live on her own. I wonder who will help her once gran is gone. Ariwara-san, who will be her husband, won't always come home from work every evening. I love gran. In order to give her peace of mind, I want to help Sakurako-san develop her own capabilities.

Whether it's because of the noise from the blow dryer, or the chance that Shouko-san will come back into the room, Sakurako-san doesn't mention Hiyori-san. It's nice to take a break from it for a bit. I'm not feeling up to talking about sad stuff right now.

Once her hair is dry, we sit down on the couch together and watch variety shows on TV for nearly an hour while eating the squid ink senbei I bought. This ordinary, everyday scenery somehow feels a little embarrassing, but also comfortable. When Shouko-san comes back from the beauty salon, the three of us chat until it gets late. I endure tiredness' onslaught until I can't stop yawning. When I return to my room, I look out at the night view through the window, and remember the feeling of Sakurako-san's hair on my fingertips.

Unfortunately, I can't see any lit up fishing boats, but it's still a superb view. I want to bask in the luxury a little longer, but unfortunately, I fall asleep right away due to the exhaustion of the day. For some reason, my mind won't settle down, so I end up having a hazy nightmare. I was worried that it was some kind of bad omen, but when I get up in the morning, I can't remember it.

File-3

In the morning, we visited Taguchi, Hiyori-san's boyfriend. Well, more accurately, her former boyfriend. His responses were emotionally unstable, a mixture of love and hatred. Her death has caused him to become confused and disorganized. He seems to have a solid alibi for the time that Hiyori-san went missing. Yamaji-kun is going to verify that. He also doesn't believe that Hiyori-san's death was a suicide, and also didn't know her computer password. However, we learned about Hiyori-san's personality.

She was quite wild and free spirited when it came to men. There were apparently quite a few filling the seats at the funeral. In the end, that's about all we learned. We didn't leave with any big results. Honestly, I'm skeptical to say if her death was a suicide or not. It's not clear yet. I'm more worried about the two of them getting involved any more than this than I am about myself. In the evening, Yamaji-kun and Satsuki-kun both contacted me.

In the past, Hiyori-san had a fiancé who she promised to marry, but they broke up before the wedding. I visit him with just Yamaji-kun, since Satsuki-kun doesn't feel up to it. Satsuki-kun knows how much of a temper her sister had, especially in regards to men. She says that she can't blame her parents, since they didn't know her sister as well as she did, but her sadness is still apparent. At least she wants to know the truth behind her sister's death. We decide to visit not only Hiyori-san's former fiancé, but also the parents of her friend from high school who committed suicide. I just hope that this doesn't deepen Satsuki-kun's wounds.

Some people, like my friend Imai, can't sleep with a different pillow. He even brings his pillow when he travels, but it doesn't matter to me at all. I can sleep just fine anywhere, and with any pillow. I found that it's nice using a cylindrical pillow as a footrest. I have an early morning, so I climb into bed.

I wake up a little earlier than usual because of my nightmare. Sakurako-san and Shouko-san are still sleeping. I can't move around too much in the hotel room, so I head to the public bath. It feels so luxurious to have a relaxing bath first thing in the morning. I return to the room, since I'm getting hungry and don't think I can wait for breakfast. Inside, Sakurako-san has gotten dressed, and is reading the newspaper on the couch.

"Oh, good morning."

I make tea for both of us, grab a handful of sablé with the hotel logo on them, and sit on the couch with her.

"Where are we going today?"

"Let's see…"

"Oh, you two are up early." After handing her the tea and sablé, Sakurako-san is just about to start speaking when Shouko-san enters the room. She heads to the washroom in her gown.

I glance at her thin ankles and calves before getting embarrassed and looking away and focusing on my sablé. We have to be careful about what we talk about in the hotel, so we decide to wait until we leave. Fortunately, Shouko-san seems to be meeting with an acquaintance today.

After the three of us finish breakfast, we leave the hotel. On the opposite side of the street, there's about 10 birds chirping in the trees.

"They're grey starlings. How unusual," Sakurako-san says, leaving a white cloud from her breath. She looks up at the trees and smiles.

"Are they a rare species of bird?" I don't remember seeing these birds before, but the name sounds familiar.

"No. They also live in Asahikawa. In Hakodate, they migrate a bit later. There should be lots of them in Sapporo right now. Every December, over a thousand grey starlings make nests in the platanus trees in Odori Park in Sapporo. It causes many issues, so it's a topic of discussion there."

"Oh, now that you mention it, whenever I go there to see the Christmas lights, there's always an off-limits area around the trees near 2-chome and 3-chome. I wonder if that's because of the starlings." Shouko-san looks up at the same tree.

"There's been abnormal weather nationwide this fall. Maybe they think it's the wrong season." Well, it's not just this fall, or even just this year. There's been abnormal weather for the past few years.

"It'll be nice if we don't get a sudden wave of cold weather…" Shouko-san says, watching the chirping birds.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it. It's all up to what nature decides to do," Sakurako-san says, her voice sounding somehow lonely.

"But the abnormal weather here is really unnatural. Even November was strangely warm… It's so strange, there's no apparent reason for it."

“Everything changes eventually. You keep saying ‘abnormal’ and ‘strange,’ but thinking it was ever something consistent is nonsense. The only difference is whether the changes are gradual, or sudden.”

“…Are your specimens the only thing that doesn’t change?”

“Even those need maintenance and repairs. If I don’t keep them safe, they would break easily. The only things that don’t change are human’s minds. Humans are bad at changing themselves.” Sakurako-san says, tapping her temple with her finger. Shouko-san laughs.

“It’s true that it’s hard to change someone’s mind… but that isn’t such a bad thing, is it?”

“You think so?”

“Yes. I remember back when you used to be cute and innocent, Saachan. Now you’re an ill-tempered troublemaker, but you’re still cute.” Shouko-san says, poking Sakurako-san’s cheek. “As for me, even when I get old and die, I’ll always be adorable. Remember that time Nao-chan and you got stuck in the storage room at the Toudou house? Or that time you-“

Sakurako-san suddenly interrupts her. Shouko-san looks surprised for a moment, after she was talking and laughing happily just before. Sakurako-san doesn’t want to listen to all this extra stuff right now.

“Honestly, just forget about all those stories from when we were kids.”

“I can’t. Humans are bad at changing, after all. Even today, I’m in a city full of memories of my late husband. Memories are nice. I wish you could just throw away the bad ones, like a rock into the ocean,” Shouko-san says in a soft voice. Just then, Shouko-san’s acquaintance’s car pulls up by the hotel to pick her up. “Well, see you later!” Shouko-san says cheerfully as she climbs into the car.

“…If only it were that easy. Memories become warped with time, distorted and sharpened until they can draw blood,” Sakurako-san mutters quietly while she watches the car drive away.

I wonder how much a person can change in 10 years. Now that I think about it, I can’t remember much about myself from 10 years ago. Shouko-san said she remembers things like going to her grandma’s sheep farm, going fishing in the ocean and dropping her boots in the water, those kinds of fun, silly memories. But, after all, I was still just a small child. Actually, I don’t remember very much about my life before I met Sakurako-san.

For Hiyori-san’s former fiancé, Osamu Hayamizaka, I wonder what’s happened in the past 10 years. Hayamizaka-san hasn’t moved. I was worried about going since it’s a holiday, but fortunately, he’s there. However, he doesn’t welcome us when we visit. The tone he uses while talking to us makes it sound like he’s asking us why we’re digging this case up again.

“I would like you to tell us what you told the police 10 years ago. We won’t stay long.”

Hayamizaka-san’s house is a detached home with a wheelchair ramp leading to the front door. I take a look around while I’m talking to him through the intercom, being careful not to be rude. There’s a white one-box car in the garden that has a handicap sticker on it. Is he sick and going to die? If so, I don’t want to bother him too much. If possible, I’d like to quickly listen to what he has to say, then leave right away. After a bit of convincing, he reluctantly opens the door for us.

Since he’s Hiyori-san’s former fiancé, I thought he’d be the same age as Taguchi-san, but he seems a bit older. I’d guess that he’s in his forties. I can’t tell if his curly hair is natural or

not, but it's definitely not as curly as Utsumi-san's. It seems more like bedhead. His body is plump, and wearing glasses and a housecoat… it feels rude to compare them, but after meeting Taguchi-san, who felt like a "cool dad", and Itou-san, who wasn't particularly fashionable, but had a sense of cleanliness… This person kind of has a different feeling about him.

"I have nothing to do with her," He says, trying to hold back the anger in his voice. His expression is very stern.

"Of course you've got nothing to do with her anymore, she's dead. However, you were planning to marry her at one point, so you can't pretend you never knew her."

"That was ages ago. That was a huge mistake," He says clearly, then tries to close the door. I stick my foot in the way to stop it.

"Ow!" He puts so much force into closing it that it squeezes my foot tight. I'm wearing sturdy hiking shoes, but the pain is still staggering. "Ahh that hurt…" I pull my foot back, and crouch down to hold it.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to…"

"Oh, it's fine, you didn't mean it. I'm okay."

Fortunately, it's not broken. I might get a bruise, but that's about it. Hayamizaka-san comes over to see where I'm hurt. Sakurako-san can't help but grin.

"More importantly, we'd like to talk to you for a little while. Please."

I feel guilty for making him feel like he hurt me, even though it's my fault in the first place. After a moment, he sighs and says, "fine, but only for a little while." I guess it was worth getting squished.

Since he doesn't want guests over while he's wearing a housecoat, he goes back into his room to get changed, then returns to us. He's wearing jeans and a denim jacket with a borg collar. I guess this is what they call 'denim on denim.' I guess he's the kind of person who doesn't care about fashion.

"There's a café nearby, so let's go there," He says, then starts walking ahead. We ask him for the name of the store so we can drive there.

We head along the main road until we find the right store. There's a handwritten sign in front of it that advertises their freshly made waffles and pancakes. Their newest menu item is an açai bowl. The red brick walls suit Hakodate well. Even though the store just opened, there's already a number of women sitting inside. The one who is most pleased by this store is none other than Sakurako-san.

She heads to her seat and happily looks through the menu. I order a café mocha. Sakurako-san has a hard time deciding, but finally chooses a pudding parfait and a hot chocolate. Hayamizaka-san orders a waffle set with cream without even looking through the menu. I guess he comes here often.

Hayamizaka-san isn't very talkative. He might just be shy, or maybe he's still wary of us. He stays silent, staring at his glass of water for a while. Eventually, he speaks up and says, "my mother is disabled, so my father and I have to take care of her. That's why I can't be out for too long."

"You can go home as soon as we're done talking. Please tell us anything you remember about Hiyori-san."

"Why you guys, though? How are you related to her?" He asks.I expected he'd ask that.

“My uncle was the forensic scientist that investigated her suicide,” Sakurako-san replies.

“We think she might have been murdered by someone who was involved in an incident involving our acquaintance,” I add to Sakurako-san’s statement. Hayamizaka-san’s gaze drops again.

“We didn’t bring you here because we suspect you. We just don’t know what the connection between your ex-fiancée and that acquaintance. That’s why we want you to tell us about her. Even now, it’s still not clear whether her death was a suicide or not.”

Hayamizaka-san wonders what he should do while he slides his cup around on the table. He looks restless. However, seeing Sakurako-san’s innocent smile as she eats her sweets makes him smile, too.

“The pudding here is good, isn’t it?” He asks. Sakurako-san nods as she scoops up another spoonful.

The pudding here is handmade, and it’s got caramel inside of it, too. There’s whipped cream, ice cream, and caramel sauce on top, and a waffle underneath. Hayamizaka-san suddenly becomes much more social. I guess he also has quite the sweet tooth. Speaking of him, he has a square waffle that’s covered in whipped cream and chocolate sauce. Just looking at it is giving me heartburn.

Sakurako-san is already well underway eating her pudding parfait, but the hot chocolate was too bitter for her. It seems people with a sweet tooth form a strange sense of solidarity. As Hayamizaka-san gradually opens up to us, he tells us about the places we should visit in Hakodate. He also tells us about how to get a good deal at a popular cheesecake shop. As thanks, Sakurako-san also tells him about her favourite shops near Asahikawa and Sapporo. I check where each of the stores he mentions are on my phone, and check if they take online orders. These people really do love sweets.

While watching the formation of the Alliance of Sweets, I sip my café mocha little by little. Maybe it’s because of the milk fat content, but it isn’t getting cold. So, when I suddenly hear “I met her at the shop in the hospital,” I have no idea what they’re talking about.

“We got the same ice cream and were waiting in the line to pay. The cashier was new, so she was also bored while waiting in line. We started talking, I remember her saying, ‘I think this ice cream is delicious, but my sister finds it too sweet,’” Hayamizaka-san says.

Apparently he used to visit the hospital often after his dad hurt his back. Somehow, his smile seems different when he talks about Hiyori-san. It’s almost like he’s half trying to direct the smile toward her. Hayamizaka-san had fallen in love with Hiyori-san, but since he didn’t have any experience with women, he didn’t- no, he couldn’t manage to say anything. Eventually, the day his dad was discharged from the hospital arrived.

He made up his mind to ask her out on that day, since he was almost involved in a car accident on his way to the hospital. He wasn’t injured, but if anything had been different… That fear is what caused him to work up his courage. He didn’t want to have any regrets, and Hiyori-san ended up agreeing. He tells us about how busy work was, but they still enjoyed their time together despite not being able to meet often.

At least, Hayamizaka-san thought so. She even accepted his proposal. However, Hayamizaka-san’s mom collapsed just before the ceremony. Even though it was a case of life or

death, Hiyori-san didn't go to the hospital. Hayamizaka-san couldn't get in touch with her, but when he finally called her house, he found out that she'd gone to a beauty salon instead.

"Even though my mom was in such a dire situation, she went to a salon? She said it was for the ceremony, but it would be understandable to look a bit out of sorts. That shouldn't be her priority in that situation… I was shocked, honestly." He lets out a sigh of disappointment. "I guess she thought it was a bad choice, too. She kept saying that she had to work late as an excuse, and I started to grow suspicious of her. Eventually, I told her that the ceremony was cancelled. It might be a problem to explain more about that right now, given where we are… Is that okay?"

I guess we made him remember something unpleasant. He scoops some of the cream from his extra cup, and shakes the spoon to drop it onto his waffle.

"I asked her 'so what matters most to you is your appearance?' but she got angry. I also didn't want to pay the cancellation fees… Things went completely downhill."

He takes a big bite out of his waffle to soothe his anger. He offers the leftover cream to Sakurako-san. Sakurako-san scoops the cream onto her parfait without hesitation.

"Fortunately, my mom survived, but she's become physically disabled. Hiyori used to be a nurse. So, I thought it would be fine for her to quit her job to take care of my mom, right? She said that there's no way she'd do that, though."

"O-oh…"

"Doesn't she have any sense of duty to help her mother in law?! I understand that it's difficult to care for a loved one, but she suggested outrageous things like putting her in a facility! How could I marry a woman like that?"

"…"

He's using such a strong tone to ask us to agree with him. I look to Sakurako-san, bewildered. However, she looks uninterested, and turns her head away. She mutters "bitter…" as she takes a sip of hot chocolate.

"So, when I called off the engagement, I asked for alimony. That way, I can pay the cancellation fees for the ceremony, right? Instead, I was betrayed… In the end, my dad had to put an end to it, saying it's embarrassing to keep arguing about it."

"…Then, are you still mad at Hiyori-san?"

"Of course I am. Also, as I learned later, she was cheating on me with another man. Maybe she committed suicide because that flashy man she was playing around with ruined her status, or something. She was the kind of woman who always worried about what others thought of her." Hayamizaka-san lets out a small, rough breath while he chews his last piece of waffle.

"Anyway, is there anything else that comes to mind? For example, a reason why you think it might not have been a suicide…"

"…You think I killed her?" Hayamizaka-san glares at me from behind his glasses.

"That's not what I'm saying. I just wanted to know if she was in any kind of trouble, or anything."

"A lot of people hated that woman. Considering what happened to me, I wouldn't be surprised if she were involved in marriage fraud, or something like that."

Despite the fact that he's eating sweets, his expression is bitter. Remembering these things must be reigniting his anger. He wipes his mouth with a napkin, and says "I can't say much about that."

"But it was a good thing, wasn't it?" Suddenly, Sakurako-san speaks.

"What?"

"Before you got married, you noticed your differences, right? It'd be bad if you found out all that after you got married. After you have children, those things aren't just your problem."

"That's…" Hayamizaka-san looks at Sakurako-san with a puzzled frown.

"I'm glad you paid for it. Time cannot be bought. You can't turn time back with an hourglass. All the money in the world can't turn back time to a point where Humpty Dumpty wasn't broken. You were fortunate. You didn't waste your life with an unfaithful partner. Really, it's a good thing!" Sakurako-san stands up as she talks, and smiles at Hayamizaka-san.

"Well… If you think of it like that… then I guess so." At first, he looked unconvinced, and his brow was furrowed. Finally, though, his expression has softened, thanks to Sakurako-san.

"But I understand your anger. That Hiyori woman really was the worst."

"Yeah! That's right!" Hayamizaka-san's cheeks become flushed and he nods, but then his expression clouds.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing.. it's just, I was thinking that maybe the alimony wasn't what Hiyori wanted, after all." He lowers his gaze. "Hiyori's parents cared a lot about keeping up appearances. When she was going to take my last name, they put distance between her and themselves. The only person she could talk to was her sister… To be honest, I don't think they thought very highly of Hiyori."

Even though he's been speaking ill about Hiyori-san, as soon as Sakurako-san does it, it's as if it's lost all meaning for Hayamizaka-san. He re-words what he said before.

"Hiyori never really stuck to one thing for long. It's like… She liked herself more than she enjoyed whatever she was doing. She liked dressing up, but it was only to boost her self confidence." He squints, like he saw a bright light. His tone of voice has become gentler. "I thought that she only wanted to marry me because she wanted the freedom of choosing her own partner… but maybe she really did want to settle down and have a family. She was resented by her own family. Maybe she craved that love, and wanted her own family to provide it."

Freedom… His smile warps as his gaze drops to his cup. He lets out a deep sigh.

"…Well, that said, I couldn't tolerate her arrogance. It's her fault that my life has gotten all messed up," Hayamizaka-san says, trying to force a smile again. "That's why I don't want to remember her anymore. I told that to the detective. Anyway, I don't want to have anything to do with her ever again. I don't even want to think about her," he says decisively. From his tone, he has no doubts. I nod to show my support for him.

He says, "well, I should go," as he gets up and leaves the store. Only the payment for his portion is left on the table.

"…I'm surprised that Hiyori-san considered marrying Hayamizaka-san."

"Why?"

“Well, he kind of gives off a different impression, compared to Taguchi-san and Itou-san. It’s like he has an outdated way of thinking… like he’s the domineering husband of a household from 100 years ago.”

I drink the rest of my café mocha until there’s only dark streaks of chocolate left over. I use my spoon to scoop it up. I drink some water to clear the sweet-yet-bitter aftertaste of chocolate and coffee from my mouth.

“…Did Hiyori-san really agree to marry him? If that was the case, then the reason for breaking off the marriage… I don’t think Hiyori-san would be the one in the wrong.”

Hiyori-san certainly seems like an “evil woman” like everyone said. With all this evidence, even I can’t deny it. But… just this time, I don’t think she was doing anything wrong.

“Weddings are important to women. Sure… she was being uncooperative, but being a nurse must have been something she really cared about.”

“Every family will have personality and moral clashes. Is it really okay for that to be a reason not to get married?”

“Maybe, but…” I look down. I’m still not satisfied with that answer.

“…But, boy, I have one piece of advice.”

“Advice?”

“Ah, that’s right. It doesn’t matter what woman you fall in love with – or I guess there’s the possibility of them being a man. That’s your choice. Either way, you shouldn’t talk too much to a person you’ve broken up with. Things like their strengths and weaknesses. Otherwise remembering or talking about them won’t be enjoyable at all. It wouldn’t be enjoyable at all for the listener, either!”

“R-right…”

I’m the one who started this conversation, but I’m starting to get bored of it. Sakurako-san angrily pushes the remaining half of her hot chocolate towards me.

“You especially won’t talk about that to me, right? Speak a single word about it, and I’ll never talk to you again. Even if, for example, you fall out of love with Yuriko, it’s your problem, and has nothing to do with me.”

“Wait… why are you bringing up Kougami now?”

First of all, Kougami is just a close friend. Sure, she’s cute, but I’d never betray her like that. Besides, Kougami would never want to go out with me.

“Now then, next we’re visiting… the parents of one of Hiyori-san’s friends from high school, right?” I change the topic and force a smile while finishing off the rest of Sakurako-san’s bitter hot chocolate. Sakurako-san nods with a grumpy expression.

“…I kind of don’t want to go there.” I let out a sigh.

“Didn’t I tell you that the truth is like bones? Bones are surrounded by organs, flesh, and blood. Many people don’t want to see what lies beneath their skin. That’s exactly why we have to expose the ugly, unpleasant things.”

“I know, but… That doesn’t change how sad or depressing it can be…”

I stare out the window as snow starts to fall, and grasp my chest. I sigh again. We leave the café and head towards Hiyori-san’s old house. From there, it isn’t far to get to her best friend from high school’s house. That woman committed suicide when she was in high school.

“This is it… right?”

It's a compact house. After getting out of the car, I check the nameplate and look around the front of the house. It's unusual to see a triangular roof in Hokkaido, but you see them sometimes in Hakodate because it doesn't snow as much there. If the roof is sloped, the snow can end up hurting someone if it falls. It can also fall into the neighbours' yard, which bothers them. Most houses in Asahikawa and Sapporo have square roofs, designed to prevent snow from falling. Unless we're hit by particularly heavy snow, there's no need to remove it. Most recently built houses in Hakodate have square shaped roofs, too. Taguchi-san, who we visited yesterday, had a triangular roof. His house must have been a bit older. He seems to keep it in good condition so nobody gets hurt.

The yew trees have a snow fence around them, and the hedges are neatly cut back. Nobody comes out when we ring the doorbell. I guess it is a holiday. We have no choice but to leave… A tiny piece of me is happy that I don't have to listen to their story.

"Do you need something?" Suddenly, a voice calls out from behind us.

A man is standing there. He's lanky, with white hair, though I can't tell how old he is. He must be a family member of the woman who committed suicide, Hitomi. Maybe he's her grandpa.

"Well… Actually, we're here to investigate the suicide of Hiyori Usubuchi-san. If you have some time, could we ask you some questions?"

"I don't want to talk about that."

The moment I mention Hiyori-san's name, he becomes visibly uncomfortable.

"I understand, but… Uhh…"

I was ready for some level of refusal. I don't want to back down, but the man in front of me looks intimidating.

"The police have already investigated it. On the day the police think she died, my wife and I were both in Sapporo, visiting relatives after an accident. All my relatives know I was there. Even if someone had left in the middle of the night, it'd be impossible to return by morning."

"We don't doubt you."

Suddenly, Sakurako-san grabs my shoulder and pulls me back, then steps between me and the man. I don't think I could have done the same thing if our positions were reversed. I feel frustrated by my own cowardice.

"In that case, why are you here?"

"We want to double check the facts. I want to know the relationship between you and Hiyori Usubuchi. If possible, we would like to ask you about the woman who died, Hitomi."

"What did you just say?"

Sakurako-san's impolite word choice throws fuel onto the fire. The man looks at us, red in the face, but Sakurako-san doesn't flinch. The two of them stare at each other for a few moments, until the man breaks eye contact first.

"…Well, whatever. Come in." He seems ashamed that he got so riled up at a girl. He takes a deep breath before talking to us.

"Um… but…"

"We can't talk about it outside."

To be honest, I still feel like this guy is a little dangerous. Hayamizaka-san was scary, but this person's anger seems sharper, and deeper. Therefore, entering his house is scary. I look at Sakurako-san. I want to ask her what we should do with my expression, but she's already carelessly following the man into the entrance. I can't just let Sakurako-san go alone, so I panic and chase after them.

"My wife died five years ago, so I'm the only one here. Don't complain about the mess," He says, but the room seems very well kept.

However, even though it can't be helped because of the season, the hallway is pretty cold. Fortunately, the living room is sunny. There's a cat curled up on the balcony. It has black and white fur, with white on its feet. It looks like it's wearing socks. Sakurako-san walks toward it, since she loves cats.

"…"

The first thing I notice from glancing around the room is that there's a lot of pictures. On the walls and shelves, there's pictures of various places all over the room. There's not just landscapes, but pictures of people, too. There's a family photo. A young man and woman with a small child… The people in this picture are all disconnected from each other now. Still, everyone seems to be happily smiling in this picture. At first I thought it was strange, but this man might be a photographer, and he decorated his house with some of his best pictures… Or something.

While I'm lost in thought, the man stands up, and invites me to sit at the low table. I guess he's going to get tea.

"…So you said you want to hear about my daughter, Hitomi?" The man asks.

I thought he was her grandpa, but apparently he's her dad. I thought he might be in his 70s, or even older, but perhaps he is younger than that. I guess Hitomi-san could have been born when he was older, too.

"What do you want to hear from me?"

"Anything is fine. Anything you can think of," Sakurako-san says.

The man still seems cautious of us, wondering about our reason for being here.

"Well… What is our relation to all this?"

"We're investigating because we don't know. Even if it wasn't you, for the death of your daughter, someone might have wanted revenge on Hiyori. In that case, something would need to trigger that revenge. Otherwise we won't know why it happened when it did."

"Do you know anything? For example, the anniversary of her death…" I ask again.

"Are you trying to say that my daughter's death is the reason that girl ended up dead? It's all my daughter's fault?"

"No, we're not. It's nobody's fault except the murderer's. We just want to hear as much as possible from people who might have had a grudge against that woman named Hiyori. That could lead the way to finding the culprit."

I don't know if he'll be convinced by what she said. The man silently sips his tea. Sakurako-san watches the gentle rise and fall of the cat's breathing as it falls asleep. I don't know what to do with myself, so I look at the pictures.

"…Ever since my wife passed away, I've had nothing to do with my time," the man mutters suddenly.

“Huh? Ah, right… yeah that must be… lonely, huh?”

“Ah… I can’t stand being alone. So now I attend a group for families of someone who has committed suicide, and volunteer to talk to young people about their troubles. I’m not good at talking, so all I can do is lend an ear.”

The man crosses his legs under the table, and begins talking as if he’s talking to himself, rather than to us. I correct my posture and listen closely.

Compared to Taguchi-san and the others, this man has a unique accent. It’s a bit different from the usual Hokkaido accent. Somehow the unfamiliar tone adds makes him sound even sadder.

“It’s strange, sometimes I wonder ‘why me?’ Everyone has their own serious worries... There isn’t much I can do, in the end…” He says, and turns around to grab an envelope from the drawer behind him. “But still, when young people send me letters and pictures like this… I feel like maybe there’s something I can do.”

“Then… this photograph is…” I ask. He smiles and nods.

“They’re really… just silly things. But to the people themselves, they’re important. These people are being consumed by their worries, but when I ask, they say it’s insignificant, or no big deal.” He laughs. Even though he’s laughing, he still looks truly lonely. I almost feel like I can’t look at him anymore.

“That’s right… My daughter also died of that insignificant thing.” He lets out a deep sigh, and buries his face in his hands.

“When you go out into the world, you can’t always have your way – that’s what I said to my daughter when she didn’t want to go to school. What I really should have done was listen to each and every one of the words she said to me carefully.”

“Then… What was the reason she committed suicide?”

“…It’s hard for me to say, but I don’t exactly know what pushed her to do it.” He pushes his hands against his forehead as he tries to squeeze out his words. “My wife didn’t know, either. However, as far as I’ve heard, there was a girl named Hiyori who was friends with Hitomi, but always pushed her around. Hitomi was always timid, so she always did what she was told.” His voice turns hoarse as he tries to hold back his tears.

“…It sounds like she was being treated horribly… If she tried to stand up for herself, the other students would harass her…”

“Do you have any other ideas for why she might have committed suicide?” Sakurako-san asks while she pets the cat.

“Does there need to be more of a reason? Until the detective came by to visit, I had no idea that Hiyori had died. I was happy when I heard that. Even if I resent her, I didn’t kill her. Out of everyone who resents that girl, nobody hates her more than I do…” He angrily slams his hands on the table. He knocks over one of the cups, spilling tea on the table, but he doesn’t even notice.

“Whether it’s suicide or murder… Death is just what that girl deserved. If you do something bad, karma will come back to you. A misdeed for a misdeed,” he says, his voice filled with rage. He almost looks like he’s been possessed.

“So this is how you’re trying to atone?”

“…What?”

“You’re trying to make up for the fact that you couldn’t save your daughter by helping others… but no matter how many people you save, that feeling of guilt won’t go away… You can’t save the life you wanted to most,” Sakurako-san says while holding the cat. “No matter what sin you commit, the dead will never forgive the living. All that’s left in a grave is ash. Even if you try to atone for all of eternity, all you’ll feel is regret. The dead won’t answer you.”

As if it understands what Sakurako-san said, the cat meows, sounding like it agrees with her. Then, the cat jumps out of her arms.

“You should continue to try and compensate, that’s all you can fill your heart right now. But, there’s nobody who can forgive you except yourself. After all, it’s not a bad thing to forgive yourself, so maybe you can slowly get there.”

“Allow myself…”

“That’s right… or, do you plan to visit the grave? Being alone with your thoughts is making this house cold. That girl is going to freeze at this rate…” Sakurako-san says. Finally, the man covers his face with one hand. Then, he waves his other hand, motioning for us to leave.

I don’t think any more words are needed. The cat meows while rubbing against his knee. We quietly leave his house. We return to the car, but somehow there’s a reserved, depressing mood. After having a late lunch at Lucky Pierrot, we head down to the beach for a short walk.

Naturally, it’s cold by the ocean in winter, but it’s much better compared to the coldness of Asahikawa. On some areas of the sandy beach, there’s residue from the sea foam, now covered in snow. I make a game of stepping on all the crunchy spots. Sakurako-san sits down on a piece of driftwood and watches the seagulls fight. The sea has a somewhat sad colour in winter. It almost looks like the waves are crying.

“…Do you really think Hiyori-san was the reason she committed suicide?”

“I couldn’t say. Maybe the father just doesn’t have any self confidence.”

“…”

“He said himself that she said it was ‘just a little thing.’ Since he doesn’t have much confidence in himself, he wants to believe that as much as he can. He’s so strongly convinced that he became angry when we challenged him, and even now, his hatred for Hiyori won’t go away. He’s afraid of becoming angry at someone else. It could be that… He’s secretly worried that the cause was due to family problems, and he’s really the cause. Fortunately, the dead can’t talk.”

Continuing to live for the sake of hatred, how sad. I clench my stomach as a pain jolts through me. Looking at the photos in his room tells me he isn’t a bad person deep down. If he continues that painful way of life, he won’t be able to keep going. Besides, couldn’t he find a new way to make himself happy? Maybe… He doesn’t want other parents to experience the greatest pain of his life - losing his child. I pray that he can forgive himself as soon as possible.

“…Don’t worry too much. After all, this is all just a guess. Only he knows the truth,” Sakurako-san says as she timidly touches my hand that’s resting on the seat next to her to comfort me. For a moment, I feel how warm her hand is, even though I’m so surprised.

“Umm… Then what about Hiyori-san?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if… She didn’t really commit suicide, but something sad still happened to her?” A short silence follows my question.

“…That’s what we’re investigating right now.”

“Is it really? Both yesterday and today, we just… upset people who hated her, and caused them grief. Do you really understand what this is? I just… I feel like we’re just causing pain to the people we’ve met so far.”

“That’s not it.”

“The same is true for Hiyori-san herself. At least Hayamizaka-san opened up about her a bit, but… Everyone has just been saying terrible things about her, and looking down on her… What we’re doing is in bad taste!”

Sakurako-san listens quietly while I talk, but bursts into laughter once I finish. She’s getting on my last nerve.

“…What?”

“Nothing, I just thought you were being really emotional. Yesterday, I was angry about that Hiyori woman, but today, I just pity her.”

“…”

She laughing so much, even though there’s nothing funny about this. I bite my lip, trying to hold back my rage.

“But I do think that’s one of your strong points. It’s all just subjective, but.. you’re able to understand humans from different viewpoints. I’m sure that to you, I don’t come off as just an eccentric.”

“…No, you’re just a strange person no matter how you look at it.”

Again, she laughs. It’s frustrating, but watching her smile makes my frustration disappear again.

“…Where are we going next?”

“Let’s see… The hospital where Hiyori worked. My uncle talked with the head nurse there directly.”

“Your uncle did?”

Sakurako-san nods.

“My uncle is the one who concluded that Hiyori Usubuchi committed suicide. Unfortunately, I suspect he was wrong, but there must be some reason that caused him to come to that conclusion.”

I gulp.

“I don’t know if we can meet the head nurse or not, though. On the way, I’ll tell you everything I know. You should also check the file to confirm it.”

She tosses the folder onto my lap, then grabs her car key.

Within 5 minute of replying to her email, Satsuki-kun calls me. Apparently the ex-fiancé and the parents of her former friend are reacting poorly to Yamaji-kun and Satsuki-kun. They're violently angry, and even hurt Satsuki-kun.

"We learned a lot, though. Apparently my sister didn't commit suicide, and it wasn't a random attack. She was killed by someone with a grudge against her, someone who hated her."

After I finish my work, and check my email, I still feel like I can hear her through the text on the screen. I send back, "you can talk to me whenever things get hard." Through the phone, I can hear Satsuki-kun in tears.

"This happened when she was in high school. There's a rumour that my sister drove a girl named Hitomi-san to suicide. I know that my sister would call her mean nicknames like 'fatomi,' but I thought they were good friends."

It's a common part of male friendships, but for teenage girls, nicknames are often cruel. In some cases, they specifically choose a nickname that'll get to the person. Girls aren't always sweet. Friendships between girls are more like a man and a woman in love. Sometimes they hurt each other on purpose to measure the depth of their feelings. So, as Satsuki-kun said, we don't necessarily know if it was out of pure malice.

"At the funeral service, her parents hated my sister enough to throw incense sticks at her – but if they killed my sister, why now? At least, that's what I thought. I've found that her parents still hate my sister, even now."

"What do you think about them? Do you believe that Hiyori-san backed Hitomi-san into a corner, making her choose suicide?"

"I don't know… but I think Hitomi-san was vulnerable and isolated at school. Enough for students in other grades to hear about it. My sister was a class committee member. She felt isolated in class and at school, so she was just trying to protect herself." Satsuki-kun says in a tearful voice. Suddenly, she sighs. "…But, I don't know if… her relationship with Hitomi-san was good."

She sighs again, echoing through my phone receiver. When she takes a breath after, I can still hear a bit of her tearfulness in it.

"Still, Hitomi-san's house was nearby, so she often came to hang out. You could hear the two of them laughing from her sister's room. I… don't think their relationship was dangerous."

I don't want to interrupt her story, so I only respond with short grunts to show I'm listening. I record what she says on a notepad, due to force of habit.

"But… maybe they had a secret relationship. Maybe they pretended to be good friends in private, but at school… She behaved horribly towards Hitomi-san…"

The complicated relationships between children are hard for me to understand as an adult. It's like they have their own set of values and community. In the end, someone's feelings can only be understood by the person themselves.

"What suicide method did Hitomi-san use? Do you know?"

"…After school she jumped out of the window of a classroom on the third floor. She hit her head, but didn't die right away… Her parents struggled with it for a long time."

"I see…"

"My sister was in that class. Everyone said it was my sister's fault. I didn't want to believe it, but… after hearing Hayamizaka-san and Taguchi-san talk about it, I don't know what

to think!" Satsuki-kun's voice is getting raspy. "But when you hear the story from other people, it doesn't sound like it's just lies or insults! My sister hurt this girl, walked all over her, and did all these terrible things!"

"Satsuki-kun…"

"…I'm starting to think… maybe it was a good thing my sister died, before she could do this to anyone else."

"Satsuki-kun! Don't say things like that. Unless… You really think that?" After a while of silence, Satsuki-kun lets out a long sigh.

"…I… I can't take this! I don't have a sister! I can't see my sister anymore! I don't know what to believe anymore! Who was the sister that I knew?!"

"Satsuki-kun, calm down."

Satsuki-kun suddenly raises her voice. The sound hurts my ears. That sound is coming directly from her heart.

"This… This can't be true! I didn't know my sister at all! What should I do? My sister wasn't suicidal. I'm sure of that… But did someone really hate her enough to murder her?"

"Calm down… We haven't determined if she was killed due to a grudge yet. There's the possibility that it was a random attack."

"Do you really think that? Do you really think my sister was a terrible person? Be honest, you hate my sister!"

"…I only have a limited knowledge about her." I'm trying to stay as calm as I can, and respond gently.

"So please, tell me about your sister… Things you know about her… I'm sure you know lots of great things about her."

"She was a prankster. When I had ice cream I was planning to eat after my bath, she ate it first and stuffed clay inside of it. It was such a silly prank that I couldn't help but laugh. She would take two pairs of shoes and switch one from a pair with a slightly smaller size. I didn't notice at first, and just thought it felt a little strange… I went through the whole school day like that, and only realized when I got home. I remember that there was a time the two of us got lost when we were little. I was crying because I was scared, but she pulled my hand firmly without crying at all, and encouraged me that everything was going to be okay. If we couldn't find our mom, we'd just go on an adventure on our own. We could go visit a jungle, or go see giraffes. But, the moment she saw our mom's face, my sister burst into tears. Where did her confidence from before come from? It was then that I realized that she was also scared and powerless the whole time. She had been forcing herself not to cry the whole time…" Satsuki-kun sheds a few tears while telling me her memories of her sister.

Funny, positive, brave, good-natured… There were many charming aspects of the woman called Hiyori Usubuchi. Most of all, she had a very lovely smile. Looking at her smile could make you forgive any of her mischief.

"I don't know why… Why is my sister spoken of so badly by everyone…" With that, Satsuki-kun finally breaks down crying.

Now she's left living all alone, with only objects left to remember her sister by. I wish I could make her feel better somehow. I wonder if she'll want to take a break after all of this. Still, I don't want to leave her alone in this place.

"…For the time being, let's leave the investigation to Yamaji-kun and do something relaxing, okay? Ah, that's it! Why don't you go visit Sapporo? My niece is staying there for summer vacation right now. You can do something fun together… like go to the amusement park, or-" The words slip out of my mouth. I immediately regret saying something so stupid. Sure enough, Satsuki-kun stays silent for a little while.

"…Thank you very much. The amusement park sounds lovely. How old is your niece?" Fortunately, a quiet laugh comes through the phone receiver.

"Ah… She's in her third year of high school right now."

"I see. I guess she isn't a little kid anymore, then. In that case… I'd like to be her friend, but I'm sorry. I can't go right now."

"But…"

"I understand. I can't just sit here being depressed. I can't just leave the case about my sister as it is." She replies with a strong, clear tone of voice. She really is a good little sister. No matter what you say, she'll listen.

"…Let me know if you're ever having a hard time… There's at least one person who wants to prove your sister's innocence."

I don't know if my words will be of any comfort to her. Still, she thanks me and ends the call. Once it becomes silent again, my whole body starts to feel tired. To be honest, I don't understand everything. The woman named Hiyori was exposed to the malice of others, too. Whether that's how she really was, or this was a misunderstanding, or something else… Several people have claimed to have been the targets of her behaviour…No, the last part could have been a misunderstanding. I still need some time to sort through everything we've learned. For example… Hiyori-san might have had a big flaw that caused people to dislike her. Nonetheless, people hate arrogance. People will openly dislike those who won't admit their flaws.

She didn't want to commit suicide in the first place. Yamaji-kun and Satsuki-kun both want to believe it was the fault of a murderer, whether it was intentional or accidental. But now… Satsuki-kun has to face the reality that someone would have killed her out of hatred, or a grudge. Would just saying it was a suicide really help her? I lay on my back on the couch, covering my face. I have to get up early tomorrow morning, but I don't feel like going to bed. I'm too sluggish from the fatigue…I open my eyes so see Sakurako wearing white pajamas.

"Why are you awake?" I ask. She hands me a slice of chocolate cake.

"If you're tired, it's good to eat sweet things. I read in a book that glucose increases serotonin production."

It'll take some time for the sugar to break down into glucose, though… She pushes the cake towards me. It's a European style cake. I guess she bought it as a souvenir when she was out shopping with Shouko-san today.

"…Did you go into my study without permission again?" I ask scoldingly. Sakurako's body freezes a bit.

Despite it being off limits, my study is a treasure trove for this girl. She pulls the information out of every single book and article in my study, and crams it all into her head. For this girl, absorbing knowledge comes as naturally as breathing.

"…Well, I'll have some cake. This is too much for me, though. Let's share it," I say, smiling. Sakurako faintly smiles back. That girl really loves sweet things.

"…There." I use my fork to cut the cake into a smaller and a larger piece. I try to take the smaller piece but… my hand stops. "Sakurako… you have a personality that's easily misunderstood. Most likely, that won't change. So, when you're happy, I want you to smile."

Sakurako stares at me blankly, like she doesn't understand what I'm saying. Honestly, I don't really know what I'm saying, either. Clearly, Hiyori Usubuchi has left her mark on my mind. Everyone said that smiling was her only virtue.

"Listen. Smiles will stay in a person's heart forever, and can even melt stubborn people. You're truly a kind girl, so if you smile kindly, I'm sure people will like you."

"…I don't need people to like me."

She isn't even pretending to be stoic, she really thinks it's unnecessary. She doesn't understand the joy of being close to other people.

"No, you're wrong."

I hand Sakurako her plate and pat the spot next to me on the couch, inviting her to sit down.

"How many bones do people have?"

"Around 200 for adults and 300 for babies…?"

"That's right. You don't have just one bone supporting you, all of them work together. With bones and organs surrounded by fat and muscle, then covered in skin, humans can move around freely. You may be spending your time alone, but you're actually connected to lots of other people… Understand?"

Sakurako furrows her brow. I guess she doesn't get it.

"It's simple. I'm part of your life, that's all. I'm one of the bones that supports and shapes you… Though I don't know which one."

"…The atlas." Despite her casual speech, she tilts her head to the side as she thinks.

She gently puts her hand on the back of my neck. Her fingers are warm.

"I see, that is an important one." I smile at her, and she smiles back. I push the corners of her mouth into a bigger smile. "That's it. That's how you should smile. If your love for bones is genuine, I want you to promise you'll always keep smiling like that. I hope that from now on, more and more bones will help support you."

I lower my fingers. The corners of her mouth drop again right away, but soon return to the smile from before. A sweet smile. That delighted expression, it's a genuine smile. That defenceless smile almost brings a tear to my eye. I just want to hug her.

Why did Hiyori Usubuchi die? Why did she have to die? She left behind her wonderful smile as her sister's memory, but she still vanished from this world. Investigating this case is clearly beyond what my job entails, and it isn't the right thing to do. Still, I want to know why. I have to know.

I head to my study and drag out some old reports to see if I can find anything. If it was a random attacker, there would most likely be a similar autopsy. But in the end, I can't find anything. All I can find is an unidentifiable corpse I was once involved with. The sphenoid bone was missing.

At the university, running on no sleep, I'm doing an autopsy on a woman who has been stabbed. It takes nearly 6 hours. My scalpel keeps slipping, probably because of how exhausted I am. When doing an autopsy, I always put cloth gloves on top of my nitrile gloves. The cloth gloves are slip-proof, but today, I'm blaming them anyway. The new, young secretary bought the wrong brand, so I feel a little guilty about being annoyed by it. After the autopsy, I have a very late lunch, then return to my lecture. The secretary greets me with a very sour look.

"Professor Shitara, it's… that person again."

With that expression, I immediately understand. When I enter the library, I see Yamaji-kun sitting at a long table, drinking coffee. Since the secretary looks so grumpy, I invite him to my lab.

"Man… last night I had a phone call with Satsuki-kun."

"From Satsuki-san? Um… do you talk often?" Sitting down in a chair, Yamaji-kun has a slightly dissatisfied look. He's not really trying to hide his reluctance.

"No, usually we just email. Is something wrong?"

"No…"

"Do you have a question? Or, maybe, you and her…?"

He laughs. "That's not it. I'm not particularly fond of her. To me, she's just another suspect. Even if it's Satsuki-san, I can't trust her until the truth is made clear."

He seems dissatisfied with how much we don't know about the situation right now. I tell him I'll let him know as soon as I hear anything. He nods. He really is such a straight edge.

"What about today? Do you have to work?"

"I've been taking time off for mourning since yesterday."

"…That's not really praiseworthy." I smile bitterly.

Still, Yamaji-kun's expression doesn't change. Rather, he looks like he's burning with even more fighting spirit as he drinks his coffee.

"So, why are you here today?"

"Because there's something I don't understand."

"What is it?"

"Yesterday… After parting ways with Satsuki-san, I decided to look into the hospital where Hiyori-san used to work. I met with the head nurse. She… Said it was possible that Hiyori-san chose to commit suicide." Yamaji-kun's gaze drops to the cup of coffee. His voice sounds bitter. "'Was she worried about something at work?' I asked her. She didn't respond for a while… Then she told me that Hiyori-san was being forced into a relationship with a doctor who worked part time."

"Forced?"

"Yeah… Hiyori-san wasn't very well liked with her co-workers at the hospital. Nobody stood up for her, and everyone just turned a blind eye to it. The head nurse said that she regrets not helping."

"…"

"He wasn't a very young doctor, so he wasn't liked at the hospital much from the beginning."

I don't know how to respond. This definitely isn't a pleasant conversation.

“Also, a patient she was close with died, so she might have been mentally drained from that, as well. She might have done something rash due to all the bad things piling up on her.” Yamaji-kun stands up as soon as he finishes speaking. “Anyway, I’m not very happy that we have to make things even harder for Satsuki-kun. For now, I’ll try to do some more research on my own. First, I’ll look into this doctor. He’s supposed to be visiting Sapporo right now for an academic conference, so I’ll start looking into him today.”

“You should definitely get onto that… It’s a shame that Satsuki-kun is getting involved in all of this.” I say, hitting Yamaji-kun on the shoulder to cheer him on.

I don’t want him to get so invested in this that he ignores his actual job, but I guess the same could be said about me. We’re both feeling the same discomfort with the case surrounding Hiyori Usubuchi-san’s death. It’s almost like there’s a voice in my head, yelling at me that I can’t just leave it like this.

However, when dealing with the hospital, things can get difficult. When questioning the nurses and doctors, the hospital often tells them to keep quiet about scandals. Even worse is that since Hiyori-san is dead, she can’t tell us anything. My feelings of not being able to leave this case as it is, I wonder if it’s in bad taste to not let the deceased rest in peace? I’m definitely guilty of doing that. That’s what I spend my time wondering about as I do some chores. Why are the sounds of Satsuki-kun crying, and the things Yamaji-kun said filling my head?

“Do you know when they started calling books like these ‘Atlases’?”

“…What?”

Perhaps he didn’t notice me. It’s a retired professor, Yakushiji. His hair is thick, and completely white. He’s been retired for a long time, but he drops by 3 days a week to help out the forensic science department. This department is always short on hands, after all. If something happens to me, I don’t want this place to be completely neglected. Neither the case nor the autopsy can wait. Professors from four universities have a rotation to make sure everyone can get a week off of work. I never truly get a break, though.

Professor Yakushiji is one of the founders of forensic science studies in Hokkaido. I’m proud to work with him. While I’m grateful to him for bringing me the reference book, I also feel ashamed.

“Do you know the reason?”

“Sorry, I haven’t studied it…”

While reference books are commonly called “atlases”, I’m not sure when that began. The word most likely comes from the titan in Greek mythology. Since losing the battle with the Olympians, he supports the sky on his shoulders at the ends of the earth. I’ve heard that a book of maps is called an atlas because Mercator, a geologist, was the first to refer to them as such, and had a picture of Atlas in the book. The reason we call it an “atlas of anatomy”, I don’t know.

“I don’t know, either. It’s strange, isn’t it? But, well, they’re definitely just as important to us as maps.”

“Now that you mention it, that’s true.”

“Since a human’s first cervical vertebra is called the atlas, it would be nice if there was a map to understand human life.” The professor says while spinning a small globe in his hand. “Well, footprints remain on the path you’ve walked on. I think there’s always a reason why

humans choose the path they do. I think the map I've drawn will always exist. I wonder why you chose that path."

"Path?"

"Yes. Whenever I go to or from the university, I go past the same area. I have a cute dog. It's probably just some mixed breed that's part shiba, but it has an innocent face, and it's friendly. Petting it makes me happy, too." The professor says, then stops the globe that's spinning with his fingertips. "Oh, Finland," he mutters. "Well, where you go depends on how you feel that day, of course. If you're worried and find yourself wondering 'why this path?', if you look, you may find an unexpected answer." The professor says, and places an anatomy reference book in front of me. The secretary brings us some delicious kumazasa tea. We start talking to Aoba-kun while drinking it.

Professor Yakushiji's words resonate with me.

"…Sorry, I have to leave early." I stand up and give my regards to the professor.

I take off my lab coat, and put on the jacket I was carrying. After climbing into the taxi, I call Sakurako and Shouko-san. I'm heading to the Okadama airport. It's about half an hour away from the university by taxi. I should make it just in time for the 5:30pm flight. To get to Hakodate, it takes several hours by train, but less than an hour by plane. Hakodate's airport is close to the urban area, just like Okadama airport.

After getting into another taxi, I head to the hospital where Hiyori-san used to work. I know they're busy, so I made an appointment with the head nurse. She reluctantly agreed.

She's only supposed to work the day shift, but due to an emergency I have to kill time at the coffee shop we agreed to meet at for an hour. The shop is called Allegro, and plays fittingly cheerful music inside. Honestly, it doesn't seem to be that popular. There's 3 major fast food restaurants nearby, so maybe they're taking all the customers. One cup of coffee is 580 yen. It's a bit expensive.

Why hasn't she come yet? Just as I'm starting to succumb to my uneasiness, the head nurse, Nokura, appears. She has chiseled features, a solidly built body, and appears to be quite energetic.

"I'm Shitara, I work as a professor in the forensic pathology department of the Sapporo Medical University."

"Forensic pathology professor…?" It seems that Nokura-san thought I was Yamaji-kun, and starts trembling after I introduce myself.

I apologize for the misunderstanding, and for not disclosing my position over the phone.

"There's one thing I want to ask you. Officer Yamaji told you that Hiyori-san was being sexually harassed by a doctor during work hours, right?"

"Y-yes…"

I guess she was willing to talk to the police, but not with me. All I can do is show her I'm listening.

"When I heard that, I couldn't shake this feeling that something wasn't right. Why would a woman like Hiyori-san put up with that? She doesn't sound like the kind of woman who would silently take that from someone."

"Well… Umm…"

“So if she didn’t want to be harassed, there must have been some reason she didn’t speak up. There must have been a good reason.”

“…” After I push her for answers, Nokura-san silently lowers her head.

“Could you please tell me? Nothing will happen, I just need to know.”

“…I already told everything I know to the police officer.” She replies, raising her head again.

I don’t have any other options, so I lean in close to the nurse, who is sitting across from me. Overbearingly so.

“Please tell me. Officer Yamaji is already moving on with investigating this matter. Sooner or later, he’ll come to this conclusion… I’m a doctor, too. Which is better, talking to me, a fellow doctor, or being exposed by the police?” I tell her calmly.

This is just the same as threatening her. She’s shaking. She has both her elbows on the table, with her fist pressed against her mouth. Her face is completely red with distress.

“How about… If I tell you, will you promise not to tell the police?” She prepares herself for the worst, and speaks in a quiet voice.

“I can’t make that promise. I’ll make the decision that I think is best from my point of view.”

I thought I could lie about it. In the end, I can’t go through with deceiving her.

“But… Please don’t say anything to anyone else. If possible, I want you to lock it away, and keep it a secret.” Nokura-san asks of me.

This time, it’s troublesome for me.

“…I’ll do my best.”

She doesn’t seem to know if my words are just acknowledgement, or an actual promise. She wrinkles her eyebrows. She closes her eyes while she thinks it over one more time, then suddenly starts to speak.

“I’m pretty sure that she didn’t consent to it. I think… Usubuchi hates Uematsu-sensei for what he did…” At first, her voice is weak, like she’s mumbling. Before long, she gains some confidence, and starts to speak clearer. “Uematsu-sensei was unwillingly to continue his family’s trade, but he didn’t work very hard at all. Even while he was on duty, he was never enthusiastic, and he wasn’t very reliable or honest as a doctor.”

“And Hiyori-san didn’t put up with that?”

“Right. With Usubuchi’s personality, she’d never show uneasiness in her work. She wasn’t recklessly defiant. She did her work exactly the way it had to be done… She was even the best at giving injections in the whole ward. She always acted confident, like nothing could go wrong.” All of a sudden, Nokura-san laughs. “She wasn’t the least bit cooperative. If someone asked to switch shifts with her, she wouldn’t respond. That girl never complained about the work. She didn’t dislike any of the jobs, and she always met the patients with a smile. She really had pride in her work.”

“Then…”

“Then she had a disagreement with Uematsu-sensei, and earned his disdain. So the relationship between those two… Whether she consented or was forced, I don’t think it was something Usubuchi wanted.”

“In that case, why did Hiyori-san and him…?”

An employee brings over our coffee, so Nokura-san doesn't say anything for a bit.

"This shop isn't very far from the hospital, but since it's expensive, most people who work there don't come here… But if someone at the hospital were to find out about this, I wouldn't be able to stay there."

Even though she confirms that the employee is behind the counter again, she still lowers her volume. Aside from us, the only other customer is a young man enthusiastically reading a book, who is sitting far away from us. After looking around the store again, just to be sure, Nokura-san lowers her voice even more, and leans in a bit.

"…There was a patient who was a grumpy old man. He had late-stage cancer, wouldn't cooperate with treatment, didn't get along with anyone… His wife would constantly be apologizing for his behaviour."

I set aside my coffee cup, and lean on the table a little.

"Despite his abusive language and foul mouth, Usubuchi politely helped him, and eventually he started to trust her. He had the same attitude as ever toward the other nurses, and would only listen to what Usubuchi said… Though he was still rude to her." She lets out a small laugh, but it sounds sad and lonely, somehow. Nokura-san suddenly feels anxious, and looks around the store again. "…One day, Usubuchi told me she had something to discuss. That was the first time I'd ever had an actual conversation with her. We met at this coffee shop, actually… She revealed to me that the old man wanted to die now, without waiting until he faded away."

She takes a deep breath before she continues. There's no point in hiding anything now that she's come this far.

"Was it right here?"

"Yes. It was at the window seat right there. Apparently the man said that he hates being taken care of all the time, and he's worried about his wife. He was worried that his wife was getting weaker and weaker by the day because of nursing fatigue."

"Nursing fatigue…"

"Yeah. That's why he confided in Usubuchi that he wanted to die sooner rather than later. Unfortunately, there's nothing we're allowed to do about that…"

I understand that feeling well, but it's something that just can't be done. Nokura-san makes that clear.

"Both of them had similarities in their personalities and smiles. I'm sure they both understood each other's feelings better than anyone… But we just couldn't fulfill the man's wish." She puts her elbows on the table, holding her fists against her forehead with frustration. "…Instead, he started limiting the visits his wife had, and started talking with the family about how to cope. We had to deal with it in a realistic way…. But…" She suddenly pauses.

"But?"

"…But five days later, the man suddenly died." Nokura-san raises her head and looks at me. She's looking at me like she wants someone to help her. "He died of a stroke. He was at a high risk of disease, so we cleaned everything up as if he got sick. They didn't do an autopsy or examination… That night, Usubuchi was in charge of looking after him."

"So it was… medical malpractice?"

Medical malpractice – a mistake in medical care. When a doctor or nurse makes an error.

“I don’t know, but when I came in for my late shift, the patient was already dead.” Nokura-san closes her eyes. “‘It couldn’t be…’ I thought. A while later, rumours spread that Uematsu-sensei and Usubuchi were doing something improper in the hospital. Usubuchi hates Uematsu-sensei. I immediately noticed that something seemed wrong. The doctor on call the night that the old man died was Uematsu-sensei.”

I notice that I’ve been clenching my hand into a fist. I guess it’s because I was angry from listening to this story. This story is going somewhere completely different from where I had imagined. Nokura-san is silently thinking to herself before finishing the last part.

“Now then… the ending.” She smiles at me. “Well… This is only my guess but… If Usubuchi helped the old man die, then wouldn’t Uematsu-sensei notice? He probably used that to blackmail her, so she couldn’t act as she wanted to.”

“In other words, it was assisted suicide?” Nokura-san nods.

“I didn’t believe that the man died of illness. That’s why I secretly looked into the corpse… Please look at this.” She quickly takes out her cell phone, opens an image folder, and holds it out to me.

“This is…”

“You’re a forensic pathology professor, so I’m sure you understand.”

It’s a close up photo of the corpse’s eye. Although it had started to dry out and become cloudy, there’s definitely swelling and haemorrhaged spots on the eye and eyelid. This is often the case with people who die of suffocation, such as with strangulation. It happens when the internal pressure of the capillaries rises too much, and they burst.

“Then… the cause of death wasn’t a stroke, it was external strangulation? There was no blood, though.”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t do a thorough inspection, but there was no blood on his face.” Nokura-san nods strongly.

In cases of external strangulation, depending on the method, it often causes blood or haemorrhaging on the face. The difference between internal and external asphyxiation is that with internal, there’s something preventing oxygen exchange between blood and the tissue. With external, the respiratory tract is blocked, or pressure on the chest is usually the cause.

“…But Usubuchi was forced into a relationship with Uematsu-sensei… and died. I knew their relationship was nothing good, but… Maybe she couldn’t stand the regret anymore...”

“But that’s just your guess.”

“No, it’s the only thing I can think of. Uematsu-sensei… probably helped Usubuchi with letting the patient die.”

A tear rolls down Nokura-san’s cheek. I came to Hakodate impulsively, and the plane home isn’t going to work out. The last train to Sapporo has also already left. I could rent a car and drive home, but I decided to make a reservation at a business hotel, and leave the next morning. I haven’t had dinner, but I don’t have an appetite. I just buy some alcohol, and head to the hotel.

Before I sleep, I decide to call Sakurako. I asked Shouko-san to stop by my house today. It was a sudden request, but she really helped me out by cheerfully accepting it. Of course, I don’t know how she really felt about it. Shouko-san picks up the phone. She says Sakurako has

been reading books in my study the whole time, so she's bored. To go so far as to make her say that… What a troublesome girl.

After a while, Sakurako takes over the call. "What are you doing in my study?" I ask sternly.

"Honestly… There's a lot of things in my study you shouldn't see, like pictures of corpses, and such."

"Why shouldn't I see them?"

"Because… they're corpses."

"It doesn't matter, they're just pieces of meat."

"Still…" I'm at a loss for how to answer her strange questions.

She's right. A corpse doesn't have a soul anymore.

"You shouldn't be looking at those yet. You're still a child, so I can't let you from an ethical standpoint."

Even though I'm the one who said it, I realize it's a cliché answer. Ethics, morals – it's such a stale answer. Still, I can't let this girl get used to seeing dead bodies. She isn't the kind of girl to run off and become a criminal, but still.

"Then when can I see them?

"Once you're a forensic scientist. Then I'll show you as much as you want."

I hear a sigh from my phone. "…In that case, it'll never happen." Her voice sounds pained.

We both sit in silence. I consider hanging up, but I can't just do that without saying anything. I wonder what the best thing to say right now would be. In the end, it's Sakurako that breaks the silence first.

"…Then is it okay if you just tell me about them?"

I unintentionally let a laugh slip out. Honestly, this girl. I thought my brother and Nadeshiko-san would have trouble with her, but she's my favourite niece.

"I truly wish you were my daughter."

I really, honestly think that, from the bottom of my heart. I end up telling Sakurako about the death of the old man that I'd just heard about.

"There was a hemorrhage on the body, but there was no blood… It's simple. The direct cause of death wasn't suffocation."

"You shouldn't decide that so quickly. Even if someone does die of suffocation, there isn't always blood visible from the outside."

"A histological stain… for example, hematoxylin and eosin stains?"

"No, unfortunately there isn't anything like that for this case." While I'm answering, I start to wonder how she knows that. My own niece surprises me, sometimes.

H&E staining is one of the most common and important histological staining methods. It's used on tissue samples under a microscope.

"Right… I wonder if he couldn't breathe temporarily?"

"Temporarily?"

"Yes. That's definitely not the cause of death, though."

"…I see." I let a small groan escape my throat. "The body has haemorrhaging. There's no blood, though. No subcutaneous haemorrhaging was found. Therefore, the cause of death

was likely not external asphyxiation. Furthermore, if the artificial respirator had been removed, it would have sounded an alarm and nurses would have come running… What could have caused something that appears to be a sudden stroke?"

"…Don't the symptoms sound similar to an embolism?"

"That's right, with air. All you have to do is inject air into a blood vessel with a syringe. Then, the air enters the bloodstream and blocks the blood vessel. In the past, some nurses have killed their husbands using that method."

My hand that's holding the phone is shaking. My fingers feel weak, it's all I can do to not drop the phone right now.

"That's the truth. The old man took off the respirator to commit suicide. However, the head nurse rushed over. Then, she helped the old man. She used a syringe to inject air into the man's blood…"

That nurse was, of course, Hiyori-san. Now, it's no longer considered a suicide. It was just murder.

"Shouko-san is in Sapporo until tomorrow, right? I'll be back tomorrow. Be a good girl and wait. I'll buy you a music box as a souvenir." I ask Sakurako to go let Shouko-san know what I said, then I hang up.

I leave the hotel, and get in a taxi that's heading down the road. There's only one destination.

"Shitara-sensei!?" Satsuki-kun is very surprised by my sudden visit to her apartment.

Of course she is. I apologize for not contacting her on the way here, and explain that I was very upset.

"I'm sorry this is so sudden. But I need to check your sister's computer again."

"That's fine, but…" Bewildered, Satsuki-kun leads me up to Hiyori-san's room.

I look at the clock. It's almost 11pm already. I know it's an inappropriate time for me to be visiting a young woman, but as it is now, I can't return to Sapporo.

"Uh… Would you mind if I changed clothes?"

"Oh… go ahead." Satsuki-kun says shyly.

I suddenly become aware of the fact that it's just the two of us alone in here, so I turn my attention towards the computer. Just like before, Hiyori-san's computer is still locked.

"…Do you have any idea what the password is yet?"

"No. But this time, I really need to see what's on it."

I try typing in any word that comes to mind. Fortunately, it doesn't restrict the number of attempts. While I'm trying to figure it out, I tell Satsuki-kun what happened today. She's very surprised.

"Actually… I don't think it was long before she died that she set the password on her computer. When I was trying to make new year's cards the year before she died, my computer was acting weird so I borrowed her's. I could use it just fine back then."

"Then after that… She had something on there that she didn't want you to see."

Satsuki-kun bites her lip.

"Then her password might have something to do with the old man."

I try the man's full name, first name, and last name. None of them unlock the computer.

"How about… the date?"

I was careless. I never asked about the date he died.

“I guess it can’t be helped, unless Yamaji-kun knows…”

I start pulling out my phone, but Satsuki-kun seems to remember something and opens the drawer on her sister’s desk.

“I think… This might be it…”

It’s an old newspaper. Only one particular page is left, it’s an obituary. It shows who died that day in Hokkaido, and the day and location of the wake. I immediately understand why Satsuki-kun is showing me this. I search the sections for Hakodate, Oshima, and Hiyama, looking for the man’s name.

“He died on May 1st.”

My hands shake as I type the numbers 0501 into the computer. Finally, Pandora’s box is open.

“Sensei…”

She must have just gotten out of the bath. I can smell soap, and her hair is still wet. She sits next to me. Her upper arm, still warm from the bath, touches my shoulder.

“Ah…” Satsuki-kun lets out a surprised gasp.

Honestly, I don’t feel right looking at someone else’s computer, but it can’t be helped. I open every folder on the computer. Work related things, music from an artist she liked. The images in some of the folders make us blush while checking them. Although her face isn’t visible in them, it’s probably Hiyori-san. Her companions include a slim young man, a muscular middle aged man, and countless others. Satsuki-kun turns away from the monitor. This definitely isn’t something she wants to see. Eventually, I arrive at the desired folder.

“Satsuki-kun…”

“It’s a diary…?”

Upon checking inside, we find a text file that’s the same as her will, and another folder that seems to be a diary. Inside, she wrote about ordinary, everyday things. While arguing with the old man every day, there’s a peaceful exchange of feelings. Then eventually, the old man’s anguish turned into her anguish. She was the only person who could grant his wish. However, even though she thinks that, she doesn’t seem to have made up her mind.

Finally, “that day” came. When she rushed over and saw the old man trying to take off his respirator, it seems she was touched by his desperate words. Dying with dignity. Finally, she made her decision. She injected a syringe of air into his vein. The old man got to go, just as he wanted. Her heart remained deeply wounded. May 1st - the day she killed another person.

The rest of her diary is a storm of feeling helpless, insecure, remorse, and hatred for the doctor that took advantage of her. She drowned herself in pleasure, but no matter how desperate she was, the dark fog in her heart didn’t clear.

“Yamaji-san… is going to be disappointed.” Satsuki-kun, who has been quietly staring into the monitor until now, quietly mutters.

“So your sister… she committed suicide, after all.”

She lets her head hit my shoulder.

“…But it seems like something my sister would do.” Tears travel down her cheek and onto my collarbone. “My sister was always a person who did what she thought was right…”

There was a side to her sister that she didn't know. Satsuki-kun starts sobbing. She presses her cheek to my shoulder. How long will she have to feel so upset? At least until Satsuki-kun calms down. Still, humans are strange. As the morning sun starts to rise, Satsuki-kun stops crying. She gives me an embarrassed smile, and ties back her long hair.

"…I'll tell Yamaji-san everything."

"Are you okay?" It's a foolish question.

Satsuki-kun gives a strained smile. "But… I think that's what I need to do." She drops her gaze.

"I'm sure Yamaji-san would have reached the same conclusion on his own… He worked so hard to help me. He tried to prove it wasn't suicide, that she was innocent… But we have to tell him the truth."

We can't pretend we know everything, since the dead can't tell us what they know. But we could also pretend like we have no idea, and hide what happened. I could tell her that, but as a forensic scientist, I simply can't. Even if it's something that should remain a secret, it's still the "bone" – the truth.

"Is there anything I can do?" Satsuki-kun asks, smiling.

"Then…. Please stay like this for a little longer… Until I work up the courage." I answer. She rests her head on my shoulder.

I put my arm around her slender shoulder while the whole city starts to wake up.

Allegro is the shop where they met Hiyori-san's co worker from the hospital she used to work at. I sigh as she leaves the shop.

"What's wrong?"

"It's just… To think one person's death could create something so huge. But… I guess people aren't really living all alone." I mutter.

Sakurako-san says, "…I see," while smiling, for some reason. "Ah… they really aren't." Her smile somehow seems lonely.

We finally got to meet with someone who works at the same hospital, but they weren't working there at the time Hiyori-san was. They resigned from the hospital after the uproar started. Actually, apparently they were fired. Apparently it was being reported about on TV, but I was still young, so I don't remember. Sakurako-san asked about her work hours and behaviour. She asked a lot of questions, trying to get details, but didn't end up making any new discoveries.

"In the end… We have nothing to show for our effort. It feels like this was all meaningless."

"That's not true. We made progress. We have some information that my uncle doesn't know, at least."

"That's true…"

According to the file, that morning Satsuki-san told Yamaji-san about everything, and Sakurako-san's uncle visited the old man's family. The old man's wife was lonely for a while after her husband's death, but now she's living a peaceful life with her son, his wife, and her

grandchild. Hiyori-san's death was a suicide after all. The sad truth is that Yamaji-san found out, he became consumed by her death.

The involvement of the hospital, old woman, and Satsuki-san's family led to the issue of death with dignity and assisted suicide being brought up. Nobody is against the old man for what he did, it was the only way he could be helped. According to the higher ups, the old man didn't have much longer to live in the first place. Most importantly, the old man's family feels guilt about Hiyori-san's suicide. Satsuki-san stays firm, and her parents support her.

There were several times where Satsuki-san became anxious, and met up with Shitara-ojisan. Over time, they began to notice their mutual feelings for each other. Shitara-ojisan pretended not to notice his feelings, but it seems she understood anyway. Before long, Satsuki-san told Shitara-ojisan that she wanted to talk with him about something important concerning their future. Shitara-ojisan left his house, as they had promised to have dinner together that evening.

But that day, while doing an autopsy at the request of the police, he noticed that recently his scalpel often slipped from his hand. He had a strange, uneasy feeling about it, so he got a medical examination at the university. Unfortunately, his intuition was right on the mark. It was ALS - Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. An incurable disease. It's a terminal illness.

In the end, he didn't go to the restaurant where Satsuki-san was waiting for him. If he went, Satsuki-san would definitely try to support him, and he didn't want her to carry that burden. I don't know what Satsuki-san thought, but it seems she never called him again. The file pauses there.

After that, Shitara-ojisan committed himself to forensic pathology until he was hospitalized. During that time, he didn't refuse any autopsies, and visited different universities. He ended up being called "the god of forensic pathology" by the police. Even now, there's always people visiting his hospital room to consult with him.

"In the end, we never got to visit the family of the old man who died… I hope we can at least talk to Satsuki-san and Yamaji-san." I say as I close the file and head back to the car.

It's snowing again.

"Is there any chance that he wrote down new contact info afterwards?"

"I guess there's no choice but to check ourselves."

That's right. I forgot that we were keeping this investigation a secret.

"Oh! Satsuki-san aside, we should be able to look into Yamaji. It'll be easy. Let's visit the police station. Even if he's moved to a different jurisdiction, they should still know something."

"I don't like police stations." Sakurako-san wrinkles her nose. How can the fiancée of a police officer say that?

"I know, I'll do all the talking."

Anyway, since we've already come this far, I'd really like to talk to Satsuki-san and Yamaji-san directly. Over the last decade, they might have thought of a new idea or learned something that could lead to a different conclusion.

After finally convincing Sakurako-san to come with me, we visited the Hakodate central police station in Goryoukaku-cho. I wonder why I feel nervous when I go into a police station, even though I haven't done anything wrong.

“I know this is weird to ask, but do you know if someone named Youichi Yamaji-san worked here around 10 years ago? He happened to help us out before, so we were wondering where he is now,” I ask.

However, we’re dumbfounded by the response we get.

“Huh? He disappeared?”

“Yes. Yamaji disappeared 10 years ago, and nobody has been able to contact him since.”

“No way…”

While we head back to the car and try to digest what we just heard, a bitter feeling rises through my chest. Sakurako-san’s expression is angry and grim. Still in shock, we both stayed silent the whole way back to the hotel. I’m sure Shouko-san is going to think we got into a fight.

Even during dinner, Sakurako-san doesn’t say anything, and goes back to her room after she finishes. I go back to my room, too. Fortunately, Imai and Kougami messaged me, so I can take my mind off things while I talk to them. My phone soon starts to buzz in my hand, so I figure one of them is phoning me.

“Huh? Who? A call starting with 011… from Sapporo?”

I’m surprised that I’m getting a call from an unknown number. I look at my watch. It’s already past midnight. It’s too late for it to be a telemarketer or something, so maybe they just have the wrong number. Looking closer, I realize that it’s not actually an unfamiliar number at all.

“…The Sapporo University forensic pathology department?”

I saw this number over and over again in the file I was reading both yesterday and today. It’s the number for the university that Shitara-ojisan worked at.

“Umm, hello…” I timidly answer the call.

“Sorry for the sudden phone call. I’m Aoba, someone who works in the forensic pathology department of Sapporo University.”

“Aoba… Oh, right.”

I remember now. I’m relieved. I remember seeing him mentioned several times in the journal.

“Is there a young lady with you? I was told that I could contact her if I called this number.”

“Yeah, just… Give me a second.”

I rush down the stairs, and knock on Sakurako-san’s bedroom door. For better or for worse, Shouko-san seems to have gone to the beauty salon again. When I hand the phone to Sakurako-san, she sounds happy.

“It’s been a while, Aoba-san.”

“Don’t ‘it’s been a while’ me! You’ve been using the professor’s name while investigating all around Hakodate, so I got a confirmation call from the university! What are you doing?!” I can hear an angry voice coming from my phone.

“Sorry about that” Sakurako-san is grinning while replying to such an angry voice. Unfortunately, that smile doesn’t reach Aoba-san through the phone.

“You’re not sorry! Stop whatever you’re doing immediately. This isn’t your case. Just leave it to the police.”

“Then who’s going to do it? The police aren’t investigating this case anymore.” Sakurako-san replies clearly.

Sure, the police have been investigating the bones we found at the abandoned house in Asahikawa, but they don't believe that the culprit is the "sphenoider". They seem to think that the existence of the artist, Hanabusa, is just the girls' imagination. The reason is that there wasn't any hair of fingerprints that could be Hanabusa's. Sakurako-san was really angry when Ariwara-san told her that.

"Please calm down. Even if that's true, you shouldn't be the one doing this."

"I'm the only one who can do it!" Sakurako-san suddenly raises her voice. "If word gets out about this, my uncle is definitely going to find out. By the way, you don't happen to have Satsuki Usubuchi's new address, do you?"

"What did you just say? Even if I did know, I wouldn't tell you."

"This case was important to my uncle. Please tell me"

I can hear Aoba-san sigh deeply over the phone. "…Young lady. Do you really think Professor Shitara would be happy if he knew you were doing this?"

"He doesn't have to be happy about it. All that matters is knowing the truth about her death. Tell me you'll keep this a secret from him! Aoba-san, how much longer do you think he's going to live?!"

"…"

It's become silent again.

"Please stop… You really sound just like Shitara-sensei, don't you?" He says weakly. "It's Umarayou-san."

"…What?"

"It's Usubuchi-san. She's currently working as a photographer. She takes nature photos around the outskirts of Hakodate. She's appeared in the newspaper recently, as well."

"Satsuki Usubuchi has?"

I hurriedly pull over a notepad and pen with the hotel logo on them, and write down "Umarayou Photography".

"I don't know her personally, but the department receives a new year's card from her every year."

"Then, do you know her contact information?"

"Maybe if I look up her name online, I can find her contact information. I'll check now, and get back to you with what I find. But… I think the address was just written as the studio. So I can tell you where her workplace is. Is that okay?"

"No problem"

Once the phone call ends, I take out my phone and look up Umarayou. There certainly does seem to be a photography company in Hakodate called Umarayou. There's a Doshin article saying that their solo exhibit held near Sapporo recently was popular.

While I'm investigating her, Aoba-san calls again. He's looked into her contact info.

"…I need two days." Aoba-san says, cutting off Sakurako-san while she tries to thank him. "Just wait two days. I'll talk to the professor, then you can keep playing detective."

"Aoba-san…"

"Is that okay? Please stop doing anything dangerous. Your life isn't just yours. As for the boy you drag along, he's completely unrelated to the professor, isn't he? It would be terrible if something happened. Please keep that in mind."

The words “unrelated” unexpectedly stick in my chest like a thorn. Before Sakurako-san ends the call, I say, “it’s fine, I’ll cooperate.”

“…Is that so? I’ll be counting on you.”

Sakurako-san smiles. With just those words, I feel like I can brave any danger.

While I’m searching for more information about Satsuki-san in the living room, Shouko-san comes back.

“Oh, you’re finally back.” She says with a grin.

“Oh, sorry to worry you. The two of us are going out again tomorrow morning… Is that okay?”

“Yes, it’s fine. Today has been exhausting, so I’d like to relax tomorrow until the afternoon.” Shouko-san says lightheartedly.

Sakurako-san asks where she’s been. As usual, the dinner at the hotel wasn’t enough for me, so I went to a nearby convenience store to get a yakitori bento. The Hasegawa stores in Hakodate are famous for their yakitori bento. The salty sweetness goes great with rice.

The moment I return to the room, I get a call on my phone. I recognize Yamaji-san from his easygoing, “it’s been a while.” I’m getting calls from all kinds of people tonight. After a bit of catching up, we get down to business.

“There’s a detective who’s named Yamaji-san, so I wanted to ask if you know him. His full name is Youichi Yamaji-san… and it sounds like he’s been missing for a long time.”

I contacted him hoping that he might know a way to contact him…

“…Yamaji-san?”

“…” All I’m met with is a strange, confusing silence.

“Um, Yamaji-sa-“

“Where did you hear about him?” Yamaji-san says, interrupting me.

“Oh, do you know him after all?”

“He’s my brother.”

“…Huh?”

“He was really excited to follow a case in our home town, Hakodate.” Yamaji-san says in a hoarse voice.

I now realize that his unique speech patterns are from Hakodate. I didn’t realize that he used to live here.

“…Oh, I guess you would know, then. He sounded like he was pretty similar to you…”

Now that he’s said that, I can really see the resemblance. It feels like they both had a secret they kept hidden away. Knowing that they’re brothers, I can understand why detective Yamaji was so tenacious.

“…I don’t know how you know about my brother… But I don’t know where to look for him… I haven’t been able to contact him in 10 years. I’ve tried looking for him, but I never found him.”

“I heard that… from the police.”

I tell Yamaji-san about the investigation I’ve been doing with Sakurako-san for the past 2 days, as well as about Futaba-san’s case. After giving him a general summary, he mutters, “is that so…” Apparently Yamaji-san doesn’t know exactly what his brother was doing before he disappeared.

“Honestly… He was always so impulsive, then he just up and disappeared. Leaving his room as it was… I had to sort through all his things. Everyone was so… pessimistic, saying that he’s probably dead.”

Yamaji-san tells me the unfortunate news about his evaluation on the case. Upper management disciplined him for his actions, and cut his pay. Even though he was trying to find out the truth, he ended up hurting a lot of people, and fell into depression. Then, he suddenly disappeared one day. A while later, a letter of resignation was mailed to his workplace. I can hear officer Yamaji’s voice tremble with anger through the phone.

“I don’t know what actually happened. Is he alive…? Or is he dead? I don’t think he would have committed suicide. After hearing everything from you, I have so much to think about.”

“…”

“The the very least, my brother wasn’t the kind of person who would just throw things away. I wanted to be just like him, so I became a police officer…. But unfortunately, I couldn’t be a detective. But this is the only thing I can say. My brother firmly held the belief that someone can’t commit suicide while in the middle of a case.”

“We’re supposed to be visiting Satsuki-san tomorrow. If she can give us any new information, we’ll be closer to finding the true culprit.” I say with as much power as I can. For officer Yamaji’s sake, I want to find the culprit.

“Tell me if you learn anything… Even if it’s bad news.” He says before hanging up.

When I close my eyes to go to sleep, I can’t help but thing that officer Yamaji and Satsuki-san are similar, since they both firmly believe their loved one didn’t commit suicide.

On the morning of the third day, we leave the hotel earlier than usual. We don’t have much time left to investigate.

We head to Satsuki-san’s studio. It’s in a room in an apartment, with a decorative sign plate on the door. We ring the intercom, but nobody comes out. Apparently she doesn’t live here full-time. Fortunately, the room is on the second floor of the building, so there’s a nice view from the window. We head back to the car and wait on the side of the road while we wait for Satsuki-san to come.

Maybe she isn’t coming here today. I try calling the phone number I saw on the internet, but it’s the landline in the studio, so I just get the answering machine. I try the email address, too, but it doesn’t seem to be in use anymore. We have no choice but to wait for her to show up.

Fortunately, Hakodate hasn’t gotten as much snow as Asahikawa, so there isn’t much snow piled up by the roads. I use the car navigation system’s 1seg to watch a Hokkaido news program. There’s a special feature about Hakodate. Now that I think about it, today is Christmas Eve. Since it’s a holiday, the streets are busy. There’s supposed to be fireworks tonight in Hakodate, too.

Oh yeah, Kougami wanted to see them. Every year in Asahikawa, we have the “fantasy of sound and light” fireworks near the Ryoujin bridge. She couldn’t go to either display this year, so she keeps talking about how much she wanted to go.

“Next year… Why don’t we go see the fireworks in Asahikawa together? I want to go with you, Kougami. There’ll be a festival, with cotton candy and lots of other tasty things to eat.” When I invited her, Sakurako-san includes herself, so I’m kind of hesitant.

"…Don't you think it would be better if I was there?"

"What are you saying so suddenly? This isn't like you, Sakurako-san."

"What do you mean, this isn't like me?"

I nod. "It's not like you to worry about other people."

"What do you mean by that?" She pouts.

A person with a white dog walks past us.

"That's right… When we get back to Asahikawa, we'll have to take Hector somewhere. You'll have to come with us, since he has more energy than me."

"Sounds good. Hector has explosive power, but surprisingly little stamina, though." I smile and reply, but Sakurako-san seems a bit embarrassed, somehow.

"Ah…"

A woman passes by the car. She looks at our car suspiciously. Our eyes meet as she walks by. It's her. That's what my intuition is telling me. Shitara-ojisan's records hardly mention anything about Satsuki-san's appearance, so my entire image of her is completely made up.

Beige suit pants, long slender limbs, thin eyebrows, glossy black hair – the only thing that's different from my image of her is that her hair is cut short. Would it get in the way while taking photos? Her black hair is like a pixie cut. When I approach the woman with my gaze, she stops in front of Satsuki-san's studio, takes a key out of her bag, and disappears inside.

"I think… that was Satsuki-san just now."

"Me too."

It seems Sakurako-san had the same idea when she saw her. We climb out of the car right away, and head toward Satsuki-san's studio. We ring the intercom, and get an instant reply.

"Is this Usubuchi-san?"

"Who are you?" A suspicious voice responds to us over the intercom.

"I'm Sakurako Kujou. I'm Shitara's niece, he used to be a professor at the Sapporo university."

I hear a small gasp. Soon, there's the sound of footsteps, then the door opens. The woman from before peeks through. This person is Satsuki-san, after all.

"Shitara-sensei's…?"

Sakurako-san nods. She urges us inside.

The inside of the room is simple, but as expected of a photographer, the walls are decorated with countless photos.

"I've heard about you. His niece that wants to study forensic pathology. Then, are you the same as your uncle?"

"No, my parents didn't allow me to go into that line of work."

"I see… That's too bad. When my parents were still around, they told me, 'being a photographer is an unstable job,' and tried to push me away from it… They didn't understand my feelings at all."

Satsuki-san takes us over to the counter table for guests, and gives us some cold mineral water. There's only two stools, so we sit down while she leans against the table on her elbow. It somehow makes her seem masculine and laid back… She's different from how I imagined her to be. I thought she would be rather timid, but she's overflowing with self-confidence. It kind of feels more like I'm talking to Hiyori-san, rather than Satsuki-san.

“So what brought you here today? Do you need a picture? Recently… an old acquaintance has been coming by asking about a picture. I changed my email address because it was getting on my nerves.”

“We want to hear the story from you. We want to hear about how Hiyori Usubuchi died.” Sakurako-san responds. Satsuki-san’s gentle expression immediately stiffens.

“My sister…? Sorry, but why now? Did you learn something new about my sister’s case?” She clenches her fist over her chest and takes a step back.

“It’s possible that your sister was murdered by someone.”

“My sister was?!”

“In Asahikawa, we found a skeleton. A piece of the skull was missing.”

Satsuki-san furrows her brow. “What does that have to do with my sister?”

“Oh, there were corpses discovered in the past that were found under the same circumstances as your sister’s. They were found to have been murdered. Your sister’s death could have a connection to it.”

“A connection?” The blood drains from Satsuki-san’s face. “No way… Then you’re saying my sister didn’t commit suicide, and she was actually murdered by some maniac? Then why now?! It… It was so hard on our parents… If it wasn’t because she was anxious, then…” Satsuki-san’s voice sounds pained. She loses the strength in her legs, so she sits down on the floor.

“Of course, we’re still investigating to find out if that’s-“ I quickly hop off my stool, and offer my hand to help her up.

“That’s exactly right.” Sakurako-san’s sharp words interrupt me.

“Huh?”

“Your sister was murdered. There’s no mistake, she didn’t commit suicide. The culprit left behind something peculiar on the corpse.”

“Something peculiar?” It’s me who repeats her words back at her.

Satsuki-san is staring at Sakurako-san with a confused expression.

“Serial killers learn after each murder. They change their method little by little each time. However, they still like to follow particular patterns. The corpse I found was cleverly hidden at another murder scene. I’m sure that if we look at the spot where Hiyori ‘committed suicide’, we would find another corpse.”

“But it’s already been 10 years since my sister’s death. I’ve heard that human bones eventually decompose, don’t they?”

“How was Onuma Lake made?” Sakurako-san answer’s Satsuki-san’s question with another question.

“Huh?”

“Tell me how Onuma lake formed. Why is there a lake there?”

Satsuki-san looks at me in bewilderment at the abrupt question. I tilt my head in confusion. I don’t know why Sakurako-san asked that, or how the lake formed. Satsuki-san helplessly hangs her head, and answers in a small voice.

“Onuma… because Komagatake erupted…”

“That’s right. It’s lime from the eruption”

“Lime?”

“Ah, that’s right. Limestone slows the decomposition of bones. Therefore, if the body was buried, there’s a good chance that the bones are still in good condition.”

“I see, since the main component of both limestone and bones is calcium…”

I‘m convinced. Satsuki-san nods in agreement.

“So, if we go there, we should be able to find some clues. You know where your sister was found, right? I’d like you to guide us.” Sakurako-san climbs off her stool and holds out a hand to Satsuki-san.

“That’s… I can’t. You want me to go to where my sister died?! I couldn’t go, even if I knew!”

I kneel next to Satsuki-san, and urge her to stand up. However, she pulls her hands away and hides her face, crying.

“If you really don’t know, we’ll have to rely on the police. It would take some time to persuade them, and they’d likely still come and bother you. Or, the three of us can go. We’ll do the investigating at the scene. You just need to guide us.”

“That’s…”

It’s definitely hard to think about. However, Sakurako-san doesn’t give up.

“Please cooperate. You’re the only one we can rely on.”

“…If it’s really just guiding you, then…”

In the end, it’s Satsuki-san who lets up. Satsuki-san is reluctant, so we stop by her house, and she drives her red mini coupe to guide us. Such a retro looking car definitely isn’t suited for Hokkaido’s winters. Even so, her car does great on the roads of Hakodate. Because of Christmas, the flow of traffic isn’t very smooth, so it takes over an hour to get to Onuma from the studio.

We park near Lake Junsai. There doesn’t seem to be anyone here today, but Satsuki-san tells us that you can catch pond smelts here in the winter. The surface of the lake is covered in ice and snow right now. It’s a bit colder here than it was in the city, so there’s more snow. Today in particular is colder than yesterday or the day before, so if it snows, we’ll get a white Christmas.

Watching out for the withered bamboo, we make our way down the barely-paved path by the shore. We leave a trail of footprints behind in the snow.

“It’s probably okay since it’s winter, but… well… aren’t there bears?” I start to become uneasy.

I’ve heard that there’s less bears hibernating than there used to be.

“There’s no sightings of bears living in the Onuma quasi-national park or Mount Komagatake, boy.” Sakurako-san says, sounding kind of condescending.

“Oh, but maybe they just haven’t been found yet?” Satsuki-san says mischievously.

“Yeah… Please don’t try to bully me…” I frown. Sakurako-san and Satsuki-san both laugh at me. Satsuki-san looks like she’s around 30 years old, but her laugh still sounds youthful.

At the start, Satsuki-san was talking and laughing, but the further we walked, the less she was. Eventually, she points into the bushes off the path.

“…I think it’s over there.” Satsuki-san’s voice is starting to sound hoarse. “There’s a big cedar tree to mark the spot, so it should be right… But what are you going to do here?”

This is the spot where Hiyori-san's body was discovered. Since it's so thick with vegetation, it's hard for people to get here. This is where she was found, half her body submerged in the lake. Just as Satsuki-san said, we reach a spot with no particular landmarks except the big cedar tree. Sakurako-san takes a look at our surroundings before she pulls out the backpack she brought from the car, and takes out her folding shovel.

"Really, what are you planning to do?" I ask.

"I'm going to dig."

"Dig…? You mean right here?" Satsuki-san says in surprise. It's understandable, really.

Even if she showed us the area, it's not like we know exactly which tree she was hanged from. All we have to work with is 'around here…' In the last 10 years, the plants have grown and changed, so the area is different from how it used to be.

"Fortunately, there's not too much snow here yet. Hey, you there."

"Me?"

"You're the one who hanged your sister. You should remember the exact location. You know more than just a tree you used as a landmark."

"…What?"

For a moment, my eyes meet Satsuki-san's. Honestly, I don't even know what Sakurako-san is saying. I look at her, thinking I misheard. Her gaze is pointed straight at Satsuki-san.

"Wh… What are you saying? I just thought it was a good landmark when I saw the scene!"

"That's right, Sakurako-san! What on earth are you on about?!"

But Sakurako-san doesn't laugh it off, she stares at Satsuki-san seriously. Satsuki-san doesn't understand what's happening, and looks to me for help.

"That's strange, who else knows? Your parents?"

"What about my parents?"

"Don't feign ignorance. I've become convinced after investigating your sister for the past three days. " Sakurako-san takes a step towards Satsuki-san.

Satsuki-san takes a few steps back.

"That woman named Hiyori. She was a stubborn person, who didn't let the things around her get to her. Everyone hated her. There's even people who have harboured anger towards her for the past 10 years, yet you wholeheartedly loved her."

"It's natural to love your sister."

"Why? Because blood is thicker than water? I noticed something while looking through my uncle's files. You were the only one who was honestly sad about her death. The only things you spoke of were stories about your sister. Of course, there were some people who valued her, like her superiors at work, but they all hated her."

"She was my sister! Is it so weird that I loved her?!" Satsuki-san yells in irritation.

"You loved her just because she was family…? That's just an opinion. You can't prove your love for her besides just saying 'I loved her.' Same with the password for her computer. You're the only one who could prove that you didn't know it. Nobody else can see inside your head." Sakurako-san says, tapping her temple.

Satsuki-san's expression twists with anger.

“Still, that’s all just assumptions and guesswork. The proof is in your words and in the computer. This whole case was lacking concrete proof in the first place. Nobody in the police force can completely prove it.” Sakurako-san pierces the ground with her shovel, after slowly shortening the distance between her and Satsuki-san. “The way the people in the file hated Hiyori was interesting. You seemed to conveniently guide them to people who hated her.”

“It’s just a coincidence. I didn’t know many of my sister’s friends to begin with.”

“Her ex-boyfriend Taguchi, her former fiancé Hayamizaka, we judged Hiyori’s personality based on what other people said. They only heard about the people at the funeral because they contacted her family. This means that someone close to her leaked the information.”

Satsuki-san looks at me again. It’s hard to believe that the person I’m making eye contact with is someone like that. I’m confused. While I don’t believe that what Sakurako-san is saying could possibly be true, I also don’t believe she’s wrong.

“Do you have any proof that it was me? Even if I was trying to feed you false information, there would still have to be something wrong with her behaviour that caused people to think that. Taguchi-san knows all about her promiscuous side.”

“That’s right… However, the man called Itou never said she was the kind of woman who was interested in such relationships.”

“Itou…?” Satsuki-san frowns.

“Taguchi’s close friend. Apparently Taguchi broke up with Hiyori because she cheated on him with Itou… Unfortunately, you didn’t get to talk to him directly. He said, ‘she had a lot of male friends.’” Sakurako-san says while she continues to dig.

“She probably had a masculine aspect to her personality. You used that to your advantage, so that my uncle and Yamaji would think of her as a lustful, wild woman. For someone we didn’t know, all it takes is for you to say something to change our perception of her.”

“…What are you talking about?” Finally, Satsuki-san’s back touches a tree. She can’t escape anymore.

“It’s simple. You hold the key to everything in this case. Even when you and Yamaji were acting on your own, you still manipulated my uncle. Since you knew everything already, you could interrupt the investigation however you wanted. Eventually, you had them look at what’s on the computer. You forged your sister’s diary. You also wrote the will, right?”

Satsuki-san is quite tall and slender, but Sakurako-san is even taller. Sakurako-san puts her hand on the tree and leans over Satsuki-san while talking in a low voice.

“You’re just making things up on your own… how can you say I did all that? Besides, why would I?”

“…Did you meet the painter?”

“I don’t have any interest in art. I like photography.” Satsuki-san turns away in refusal.

“Your pen name is ‘Umarayou’. That’s the name of the thorny bushes that creep along the sides of the roads in this area. In Manyoshu, it means thorny shrub. It can also mean common. Something average. When translated to English… It became ‘The Common Rose’.”

“Common rose…?” I repeat back.

It’s the name of a butterfly I haven’t heard of before.

“Hanabusa painted that girl as a Lethe sicelis, which has a similar pattern. She was obsessed with the death of her friend, like a butterfly dancing around a corpse. What about you? You, who hides poison deep in her chest. Are you like Hanabusa’s black, poisoned butterfly, too?”

“You think I’m hiding something? What a rude person… All of this is just baseless speculation.”

“Maybe it is. But I’m confident that I’m right. You’ve made a few mistakes.”

“Mistakes?” Satsuki-san glares at Sakurako-san.

“The password. Passwords aren’t always set to be numbers. Even though it’s more common to have your password be a phrase, you said suggested it’s a number instead. It was written in his journal.”

“I don’t remember back then very well, but couldn’t it have just been Shitara-sensei misremembering?” Satsuki-san scoffs at Sakurako-san’s words.

I’m surprised by her self-assured expression. She’s nothing like the sweet Satsuki-san from before.

“Well, I can’t deny the possibility. However, the biggest problem is the number that was set. Hiyori’s password was set to be the date that she killed that man. Perhaps you wanted to demonstrate that she still felt tied down by his death, but you overdid it. It should have just been her birthday.”

“I’m not the one who set the password.”

“No, you are. You helped guide my uncle to find that number.”

Satsuki-san lets out an exaggerated sigh. “How would I know that date was an important date to her?!”

“Because it’s not.” Sakurako-san grins. It’s an evil looking grin. “The man’s family didn’t want to draw too much attention. He wasn’t supposed to live much longer, anyway. They didn’t want it to be exposed… the reason they didn’t want him to die the day before.”

“The day before?” Satsuki-san and I say at the same time.

The day the man died should still have been the first of the month, though.

“It was a problem with unpaid pension.” Sakurako-san smiles wide. “Pension is paid on the 15th day of even numbered months, and they give you the money for both months. After the recipient of the money dies, the family that’s left gets any unpaid money for the months they were alive. Since he died on the first, his wife gets the pension for both months. If he had died the day before, his wife would have only gotten the money for one month.”

“The pension payment…”

Speaking of which, my grandpa used to give me pocket money even when he was living on pension.

“Then… Hiyori-san really…?” A chill runs up my spine. I look at Satsuki-san. Her face is completely blank.

“I’ve already confirmed that the hospital has 3 shifts.. The shifts are each around 8 hours, the evening shift being 4:30pm – midnight, and the late night shift being midnight – 8:30am. The old man died before the late night shift came in, so he would have died before the day rolled over. I guess it wasn’t that long until midnight. Therefore… the hospital was definitely

in on the plan. They postponed the time of death on his death certificate by a few hours. He didn't actually die on May 1st, his exact date of death would have been April 30th."

I can hear Satsuki-san gulp. I can tell she's nervous.

"Because of this, Hiyori became a sort of taboo at the hospital. That way, the media wouldn't find out about the man's time of death. However, you also didn't know. You got the date off by a day. The day you picked for the password wasn't special at all to Hiyori. The day special to her was the 30th – the day she killed that man." Sakurako-san smiles at Satsuki-san.

"Your sister didn't tell you about it. Didn't she trust you?" Satsuki-san stays silent, scarily expressionless. She's not looking at Sakurako-san, but somewhere far past her. I notice that her lips are trembling slightly.

"You've always been different from the rest of the Usubuchi family. In the files, you're made out to be the only innocent, sweet girl, but in reality, you're not. You were like poison to your family. You're just like Hanabusa, a sly villain."

For a moment, Satsuki-san looks like she's about to cry. She starts trembling all over, with a furious expression.

"…Whatever! I can't take this anymore!!" Satsuki-san suddenly shouts, and pushes Sakurako-san away with all her strength. "My sister was only ever thinking about herself! She always treated me like I was her servant! I was always so plain and stupid! Stupid! Awkward! An incompetent woman who couldn't do anything!! It's her fault that our parents were disappointed in me!"

Sakurako-san, who is kneeling on the ground, holds her stomach and coughs. I try to rush over to her, but Satsuki-san is faster. She pulls the shovel out of the ground, and runs into my side with all her weight. She pushes the shovel into my stomach.

"Sh-"

I hear an unpleasant sound before dropping to the ground.

"Boy!" I can hear Sakurako-san call for me.

A sharp pain runs through my chest when I try to breathe. For a second, I thought I broke a bone, but I realized that the sound was the shovel rather than me. Well, my ribs might still be cracked.

Satsuki-san clicks her tongue at her broken shovel. She tosses the aluminum part on the ground, then bashes the handle part into Sakurako-san's back without hesitation. Sakurako-san starts having another coughing fit. Satsuki-san takes the opportunity to take a folding knife from her pocket, and clicks it open. I can't sit here and watch this, so I try to force myself up.

"S-stop it, please!"

"You want me to stop… I should be the one saying that. Honestly… I wish you hadn't dug up something from so long ago." Satsuki-san spits out. A smile creeps onto her face as she grabs Sakurako-san's hair and pulls her up. "If you move, I'll kill her!" She shouts at me.

"…Do you really think you can kill me with just that knife?" Sakurako-san says in a low tone. She's trying to keep calm, but sometimes I can see her face twitch with pain.

Satsuki-san is holding Sakurako-san tight from behind her, and has the knife pressed against Sakurako-san's neck.

"Don't be stupid, a knife is enough."

Satsuki-san reaches her hand towards Sakurako-san's chest. Then, she brings her mouth close to Sakurako-san's ear.

"…If I stab here, my knife will reach your heart without your ribs getting in the way."

The tip of the knife slides slowly down the back of her neck. Sakurako-san's brow wrinkles for a moment.

"That's not… very specific. Who told you that? Hanabusa must be really familiar with the human body."

"Interrogate me as much as you want, it's pointless." Satsuki-san laughs.

"Then let's hear it from the start. Why did you kill your sister? Were you involved in Yamaji's disappearance?"

"That's simple. I had to kill someone. I don't know anything about that detective. I don't know for sure, but if he's missing, then… maybe he's already become a specimen?" Satsuki-san stifles a laugh in her throat.

"Why?"

"Because there was no other way. It's meaningless to do it any other way… he said it's best this way."

"By 'he' do you mean Hanabusa?"

"I don't need to tell you everything."

I can see Satsuki-san putting her strength into her arm that's holding the knife.

"He said that if it looks like a suicide, no one will find out. In that case… if my sister were gone, I could be the next fluttering butterfly instead… and yet, that detective tried to dig it up, even thought it should have been a suicide." Satsuki-san murmurs.

It's quite the declaration. Her voice, little by little, is starting to sound insane.

"But he didn't need to worry. I pretended to investigate with those people, but I tricked them instead. Nevertheless, that detective still didn't give up. So, I just had to shut his chatty mouth."

"Satsuki-san… you couldn't have… really…"

"Shitara-sensei believed me, as planned. What a charming man. Certainly, there was a lot of fuss at the hospital, but… I… If he had come that night, I would have told him everything… but he didn't show up…" Satsuki-san says expressionlessly.

The woman standing in front of me is full of bloodlust. I know that, yet I still can't believe that Satsuki-san killed Hiyori-san and possibly Yamaji-san.

"I'll be fine. Shoutarou, run away. Run with all your strength. Call the police." Sakurako-san says sharply. I'm stunned.

"You're not fine. I know where to stab you." Satsuki-san looks displeased. "Throw your phone away… into the bushes over there. Don't use it."

If I disobey, she'll probably stab Sakurako-san. I don't have much of a choice… I take my phone out of my phone pocket, show it to Satsuki-san, then toss it away.

"But… Since you're doing something like this, word is definitely going to get out."

"Perhaps. But nothing has gotten out yet, right?" Satsuki-san grins.

I slowly manage to stand up, despite my fear and pain.

"Did I say you could move?" She pushes the knife against Sakurako-san.

"…Go ahead. You can do whatever you want to me, but let that kid go. He's a smart kid. He has a strong sense of duty, too. He won't forget about you, but he definitely won't go to the police. He definitely won't break a promise," Sakurako-san says firmly and clearly.

"Sakurako-san…"

"How do you expect me to trust you? If you run away, I'll kill this person. Understand? If you escape, it'll be your fault that she died. It'll be the same as if you'd killed her." Satsuki-san says seriously. I glare at her.

There's no way I'd run away and leave Sakurako-san here in the first place.

"There's no trick. Either way, she'll kill me. It doesn't matter if you obey or escape, so just run!" Sakurako-san shouts. Satsuki-san's expression stiffens with rage.

"Please be quiet, Sakurako-san!" I shout, using what energy I have left. My side is excruciatingly painful.

"Satsuki-san… It's exactly as Sakurako-san said. Let's negotiate. What should I do? I don't want to die, but I don't want you to kill her, either. How can I get you to let her go? If you don't answer me, I can spend my whole life sitting here and discussing it." I take a deep breath, trying to remain as calm as possible. I choose my words carefully, trying to move her heart, even if it's just a bit.

"How can I trust you?"

"This might not be convenient for you, but… Despite how I look, I'm pretty quick on my feet. I have confidence I could get away from you. No matter how hard you try, you can't kill both of us at the same time. If you so much as scratch her, I'll run to the police for help. Even if you try to escape, you'll leave footprints in the snow. We can use that to prove that there was someone besides us here to the police. We can even use the angle of the blood splatter from the knife to determine your height."

The angle of the blood splatter… I only said that because I saw it on a foreign TV show recently. I don't know if that's something that's done in Japan. I'm just saying whatever I can. However, I see Satsuki-san's expression waver for a moment.

"You're the one with the biggest risks if you commit murder here. So, let's negotiate. There must be an option where all three of us can leave here safely." I hold out my hand to Satsuki-san.

Satsuki-san hesitates, she looks at Sakurako-san, then at me. However, she doesn't hand over Sakurako-san.

"Unfortunately, there isn't an option like that. Just call over the police if you want to. By the time they get here, it'll just be both of our corpses here – you can't arrest me then." Satsuki-san says. Her voice has a certain resolution.

Silence flows around us. Even with only the sound of cloth moving, my heart races.

"…There's just one thing I want to talk to you about," Sakurako-san says suddenly. "My uncle. There's a reason he didn't show up. He didn't abandon you."

"…What?"

"My uncle didn't respond to your feelings because… He's in the hospital right now. Unfortunately, his disease can't be cured with modern medicine. Two years after symptoms started, he needed to be put on an artificial respirator. Now, it's impossible for him to do anything

other than talk through a device. His life expectancy is a couple more years at most… no, I don't know when he'll develop pneumonia, or other fatal complications."

"Disease…?" Satsuki-san's brow, which has been furrowed until now, loosens for a moment.

"My uncle didn't want you to have to carry his burden… But he's always delighted when I visit with roses. I- Deep down, I thought my uncle still had feelings for Mrs. Shouko. But I was wrong… To him, those roses meant 'umarayou.' He was thinking of you." Sakurako-san sighs. "…He still loves you. You… were supposed to be my aunt."

"…" Satsuki-san looks at the ground. Her shoulders tremble. But she isn't just trembling. Eventually, it turns into laughter. It's a stiff kind of laugh. "…Then why? Do you really think he cared for me? It was a shame that he didn't come that day. But now… I can't give as many specimens to him!"

"Wh…" Sakurako-san looks hurt, like she's about to cry.

"My sister's sphenoid bone was almost ready to come out. Her flesh was falling off, so I was going to take it out soon, but then the police found her. It's all because of how he disappointed me! That's why I decided that I wanted to give Shitara-sensei sphenoid bones. I wanted to tell him everything to shock him, then cut his neck while he was still alive!" Satsuki-san yells, tightening her grip around Sakurako-san's throat.

I guess that's what a chokehold looks like in real life. Sakurako-san groans in pain.

"Then… Why don't I take your butterfly instead… Then maybe he'll come back to me."

Sakurako-san's face quickly starts turning red.

"Back then… I hated my sister! I hated her, I hated her! Even when I had problems, it was always her fault! I hated seeing my mom crying in such an exaggerated way! Then there was poor old me, watching my sister always getting praised!"

"Please stop it! Let her go!" I shout, leaning towards her. She takes a step back and tightens her grip.

Sakurako-san may be taller, but Satsuki-san is surprisingly well built, since she has to carry her camera equipment. Sakurako-san is frantic, but she can't get free.

"It's my sister's fault that I was always the stupid, lazy sister. My dad always told me that I'd never make it, doing this! That stupid old man! So to be more like my sister, I took a syringe full of air and pumped it into him while he was drunk and sleeping. He went belly up like a frog!"

"You couldn't have… your parents…?"

"They were unnecessary people for me. They were just obstacles getting in my way… It was just like throwing garbage into the trash bin. Pests should just be exterminated!" Satsuki-san laughs even louder. She's hysterical. Or maybe she's crying?

I suddenly notice that Satsuki-san is squeezing Sakurako-san's throat even tighter, and there's something red on her arm. It's the knife. She's cutting Sakurako-san with the knife using the same arm that's holding her down.

"Aahhh!"

I can't accept this. I rush in and slam into both of them. Satsuki-san lets go of Sakurako-san in her confusion. The moment Sakurako-san takes a breath in, a chill runs through my stomach. For a second, I don't register what happened. Then, the pain suddenly

hits. First it's ice cold, then the pain turns scorching hot. That's when I notice that I've been stabbed.

"Dang iiiiiiiiit!" Satsuki-san yells as she violently rips the knife away from me.

I almost can't believe the sound that came from my mouth from the pain. I kneel on the ground, trying to catch my breath. Sakurako-san holds onto me.

"Why would you do something so stupid?!"

"But…"

'Something so stupid,' I think to myself. I guess my confidence came from when I held down the man with the man with a knife at Ii-chan's house. I thought that maybe I could have grabbed her. Maybe I was being too over-confident. I can see Satsuki-san fleeing with the knife.

"Satsuki-san… we have to chase her…"

"No!"

"But she'll get away…"

"Shut up! Just be quiet!" Sakurako-san takes off my jacket and lays it out over the snow. She puts me down on top and rips my clothes open.

I was wearing a new flannel shirt today, with just my arms through the sleeves. I'm worried my mom will be mad, but I guess it already has a hole from where I got stabbed. Even though I got stabbed, I feel strangely calm. The pain is burning, and I can feel my heart pounding wildly in the pit of my stomach. Besides the pain, I also feel sick to my stomach.

I'm cold, my hands and feet are trembling, I'm starting to feel weak… and I'm scared. I can't stand this feeling of dread. My body twists as I let out a miserable scream. Sakurako-san takes her gloves out of her pocket. She quickly slides them on and snaps them against her wrist. I never thought she'd use those gloves on me.

"Am I… Going to die…?" I try to say through my screams. Sakurako-san does her best not to laugh.

"Well they do say that idiots never die! …Hey, you'll be fine. You can relax… The blood is dark. She didn't hit any major arteries." She says while she investigates my wound. She sighs with relief. "…But you're still in danger. Shoutarou, are you listening to me? Don't lose consciousness. Stay awake."

It takes me a while to understand what she's saying. Besides that, there's a rushing sound in my ears like a sandstorm making it hard to hear her.

"Remember the song by Diavel, The Skull. Recite it word by word. Starting from the frontal bone. Good, keep repeating it until I get back." She slowly, carefully tells me what to do.

She starts singing the song while she puts my arms over my stomach and tightly ties my jacket around them. I unintentionally start smiling. She's even thinking about bones at a time like this. I think this is the first time I've heard her sing. She's not bad, but she isn't exactly great at it.

"I'm going to look for your phone. I'll call the ambulance right away. You're lucky I was here. If they can't get here soon, I'll sew you up. Anyway, just keep singing."

Frontal bone, parietal bone, temporal bone – there's 15 types and 23 bones in the human skull. While I'm singing to myself, Sakurako-san suddenly comes back and starts talking frantically. But maybe I'm just seeing things. The only thing I can hear is the song in my head.

Did you know? The symbol for the word "person (人)" is hidden in the skull. It's like a quiz about bones in the middle of the song. I've been thinking about it for a while, but it's kind of

a pain that I'm always subjected to her bone talk. But maybe if I don't listen to her now, I'll never get to hear it again.

"Where… is it… hidden in the head?"

"…Oh, it's the lambda suture. If you look at the skull from behind, it looks just like the kanji for ;'person'. In the past it used to be called the person suture. By the way, the term 'lambda' comes from the Greek symbol λ, which looks similar." Sakurako-san tells me while she holds me against her chest.

I thought she was happy. Then, I hear a trembling, nasally voice. I take my sweater off, even though I'm cold. Gran would be angry if I let Sakurako-san catch a cold. While thinking about that, my consciousness starts to fade. I feel like I can hear Sakurako-san calling out to someone other than me in between moments of consciousness. "Soutarou."

When I wake up in the morning, I'm surprised and have no idea where I am. It feels like when I would wake up first thing in the morning after sleeping over at my grandpa's house. But this morning, I really have no idea where I am. For a little while, I sit there in a daze.

When I think about it, I realize I'm not in the high class hotel that's run by the Toudou family. Then, where am I? I try to sit up, but someone grabs my shoulder.

"…Huh?"

A large, warm hand pushes me back onto my pillow. I panic and try to look at whose hand it is, but I don't even know what's going on.

"You shouldn't move too suddenly… I'll go call a nurse."

"Yamaji… san?"

"Yeah, it's been a while."

Yamaji-san is here. This person is Yamaji-san, but it's the Yamaji-san that I've met. He has darkish skin, and a gentle, somehow sweet, smile. It's Teruhiko Yamaji-san. The police officer that protects the peace of Mashike.

"…Why?"

"Well after all that… even I can't just sit around." Yamaji-san says sadly, and reaches for my forehead.

He's measuring my temperature. It's a gentle hand. I feel so relieved for a moment, that my eyes start tearing up.

I finally remember what happened to me. I was stabbed by Satsuki-san. With my head clear, the memories of the pain and fear come in waves like an assault. I can't stop my tears. Yamaji-san pats my head to calm me down and says "It's okay now."

At least I feel like I'm "okay". I didn't die from my injury.

"…Ah! Is Sakurako-san safe?!"

"I'm here." I suddenly hear a voice from the other side of the white curtain.

I turn my head to see her walk past the curtains toward my bed. She's making a very grumpy, pouty face.

"I'm glad you're safe" I say, hurriedly wiping my tears and letting out a relieved sigh. She hits me on the head.

"You made everyone worry about you! It would have been terrible if I were only a little later!"

“Kujou-san! You can’t do that! Shoutarou-kun is injured!” Yamaji-san stops Sakurako-san, who has her fist clenched and ready to hit me again.

“That’s… You don’t need to be angry!” What a person.

“Honestly… You should thank Yamaji. About your phone… I couldn’t find it, but he just called. I found it thanks to the ringtone, then I called an ambulance right away.” Sakurako-san says, pretending she didn’t do anything wrong.

“I came to Hakodate as fast as I could, but I didn’t know where you two were.” Yamaji-san smiles. “Really… I’m glad I made it in time. You were lucky.”

The timing was definitely miraculous. I’m lucky to have had Sakurako-san with me. She had to go through a lot.

“That’s right… she… What happened to Satsuki-san?” I ask. The two of them look at each other.

“Um…”

“…Her corpse was found.” Yamaji-san says sadly.

“Huh?”

“At Junsai lake. It wasn’t completely covered in ice yet. She was found submerged in the water.”

“Then…”

“I don’t know whether she fell in while trying to escape, or jumped in on her own… the truth is shrouded in darkness.”

After all, we don’t even know anything about Hanabusa, the painter. I hang my head. What were these past three days for, then…?

“But, a body was found.”

“Huh?”

“With Kujo-san’s testimony, we got several people to dig up that spot. A broken skull was found… but it wasn’t my brother’s.”

“I see…”

“…But it wasn’t a mistake to chase after that case. It wasn’t suicide. It was a crime, just like my brother believed.” Yamaji-san says earnestly. His eyes slowly fill with tears, so he lowers his head in an attempt to hide it.

“…It’s the same as with Isozaki’s students. The man called Hanabusa awakens the evil intent in peoples’ hearts, pushes them to murder, then steals away the sphenoid bone… That’s probably not the only collection of his, either… He can’t take them without killing someone. Bones can only come from corpses.” Sakurako-san mutters in a disgusted voice. She definitely sounds angry.

I look at her face. She’s still beautiful even when she’s angry.

“…What is it?”

“Nothing… I was just glad that you’re safe.”

Sakurako-san frowns at me. Apparently I was staring too much.

“That’s all for my speech.” Sakurako-san pouts.

There’s something I really want to ask her. While I worry about whether I should say it or not, I suddenly hear someone scream, “Shoutarou!”

“M… Mom?”

I guess she was out buying a few things. She drops the bottle of tea she was holding and jumps on me.

“W-what? That hurts!”

I try to struggle free. It really is my mom. It’s kind of embarrassing to be hugging her in front of everyone. I thought she was laughing while she was hugging me at first, but then I realize that she’s actually crying. I should have realized.

It’s the same for Sakurako-san, her uncle and gran are probably worried about her, too. But… It’s also the same for me. I’m the one who went out and got hurt. An indescribable feeling of guilt runs through me.

“Sorry… It’s okay, it’s really okay.”

I gently pat my crying mom’s back. I don’t think I’ve seen her cry since my grandma died. I can see Yamaji-san and Sakurako-san leave the hospital room. I nod at them.

Fortunately, my injuries aren’t too much of a big deal, but it’ll leave a scar on my stomach. After several days, I get transferred from the Hakodate hospital to one in Asahikawa. Since I’ll need to stay in the hospital for a while, I thought it would get boring. To my surprise, various people come to visit me every day. Besides Imai, my classmates, and Isozaki-sensei, there’s Utsumi-san and Ii-chan, the Fujioka couple, Ariwara-san and Sawa-san…

Gran and Shouko-san in particular feel responsible for my injury, so even though I said it wasn’t, they still help me take care of things. Kougami was angry, crying, and confused when she first saw me. I think it was the most times I’ve been called an idiot in my whole life. I can’t help but think she looks cute when she’s crying. I feel kind of happy that she’s worried about me. I really do have great friends. My mom is surprised by how many friends I have that she didn’t know about. At the same time, she’s also worried about what I’ve been doing.

During the rest of my hospital stay, Sakurako-san doesn’t come to visit me. I know that it’s just like her to do that, and she’s probably trying to deal with guilt in her own way, but then I suddenly remember what she said before.

‘I never want to see your corpse. So don’t get yourself involved with me again.’ I guess she’s trying to distance herself from me again. I absolutely don’t want that. I could contact her… but what should I say? But that isn’t all.

Kougami tells me something in secret. Apparently my mom doesn’t want me to see Sakurako-san ever again. She asked Shouko-san and gran to tell her that. It’s my choice who I want to see. I had a fight with my mom over it. In the end, my mom shook her head at me. At the very least, I can’t see her until my injury is completely healed. I couldn’t say anything else, I was crying too much.

I’m worried about what she’s thinking while I can’t talk to her. It’s fine if she isn’t thinking about anything. But what if she’s worrying all on her own? What if she’s feeling guilty? I’ve been thinking of so many things during the time we can’t meet. Most of all, I’ve been thinking about something I’ve wanted to say for a long time. Who is “Soutarou”?

Actually, I have a bit of an idea who it is. But I don’t know anything for sure. That’s why I want to find out.

I spend all my time worrying as the end of the year comes, and after new year’s passes, a cold winter arrives. The pure white, isolating snow reminds me of Sakurako-san. I can’t stand this anymore. I resolve myself, and finally pick up the phone.

Epilogue

Shouko-san says white rooms make her restless, but for me, they feel tranquil. When everything happens at the same time and place, I feel at ease. I like the quiet, but of course, I don't hate sound either.

"Well, I'm here." I say to the boy in the room that I'm standing in front of.

Perhaps a little surprised by my cold voice, the boy gives me a reserved bow.

"I didn't think you'd get here so soon" He says, sounding pleased by my visit.

"This whole time… this whole time I just wanted to talk."

The boy seems a bit nervous, but he looks at me, full of anticipation.

"Me, too"

He smiles happily at my reply. That boy's smile is full of innocence. However, his smile is still stiff with nervousness.

"…But first, I want to ask you something."

When I tell him I won't deny his request, he clears his throat. He takes a deep breath.

"I've been… I've been wondering this whole time. Who is 'Soutarou'?"

I don't know how to answer right away. He leans forward and doesn't wait for me to reply.

"At Shouko-san's grandfather's house, her grandmother mistook me for 'Soutarou'-san. And that day when you hugged me, you called me 'Soutarou'-san… Sakurako-san, who is 'Soutarou'-san to you? What's your relationship with them?!"

The boy looks at me with begging eyes. I feel guilty about answering. But it isn't fair to not answer.

"…My younger brother." After staring downward for a long time, I finally answer. "My younger brother. If he were alive… he'd be 20 years old this year."

Special Short Story: The Palm of a Gentle Hand

While we're heading back from visiting Hector's former owners' house, I notice that Sakurako-san missed the turn I wanted her to take.

"Oh! The bookstore! Please stop at the bookstore for a minute!"

She clicks her tongue at my sudden shout. "You should've said that sooner."

Even though her voice sounds angry, apparently she'll still take me. She makes a U-turn a little further down the road, and heads back.

"I'm sorry, I was originally planning on going there today."

Sometimes Hector's previous owners want to see him, so I went with them today. After being treated to their cooking, we left way later than we were supposed to. Even though she still looks angry, Sakurako-san pulls into a big parking lot.

"!!"

Then, she suddenly steps on the break. I don't see what it is at first. A mother holding a baby runs in front of the car, bowing her head.

"Th… That was close."

A young boy, who looks to be in kindergarten, is running in front of her. I guess Sakurako-san stepped on the break so fast to avoid hitting the child who suddenly jumped out.

Afterwards, we head to the bookstore. The store is spacious inside, and has the distinct smell of paper and ink. Just that is enough to get me excited.

"I don't like big bookstores, since I can't find where anything is and they're noisy. Bookstores should be small, where there only needs to be one employee," Sakurako-san says, looking displeased.

"Really? It's not too hard to find things if you use the lookup stations in the store. Finding different books while you search for the one you want is fun, too."

She doesn't seem very convinced by what I said. Well, for me, bookstores are fascinating, so I don't understand where she's coming from. But ah! With so many books in front of me, it's impossible to not get excited. We fumble around in the store for a while before coming across a stylish reference book corner. They emphasize design like picture books, rather than academic guides. Among them is a photo collection of cute animals. Of course, Sakurako-san reaches for the collection of bone pictures.

"Don't you have that one?"

"I do have a photo collection by a different bone photographer, but not this one."

The heavy, black book seems to be trying to capture skeletal specimens in an artistic way. The thin, delicate skeleton of a snake feels like it's staring at me on the front cover.

"Remember the snake skeleton at Maruyama zoo? That one was pretty, too."

Sakurako-san looks at me and smiles.

"…What is it?"

"No, it's just that it made me feel happy and proud to hear you praise a specimen, as someone who makes them. I know, I'll give this to you as an early Christmas present."

Perhaps it's out of consideration so I can browse at my own pace, but she sits down on a white bench nearby, happily hugging the book to her chest.

“No, it’s fine, I don’t need it.”

At this rate, I’m really going to end up getting that book as a gift. I become flustered. It’s not that it would be a burden on me, but there’s a place and a time for these things. It’s expensive, and it’s not really a book I should have at my house.

“I see, then why don’t I give you my Japanese forest rat snake specimen I have at home? I accidentally broke one of the ribs, but it’s still in good condition. I didn’t have any plans to give it away, but if you’d like it, then I guess I could part with it. Are there any other bones you want?”

“I don’t need any bones in the first place, I’d rather have cross bike gloves…”

Sakurako-san nods and continues talking happily. I want a more ordinary gift. If I just made a request, she wouldn’t listen to me. I’m really happy that she would give me a skeletal specimen that she worked so hard on. To be honest, I’m not as scared of bones as I used to be, but if my mom comes into my room to clean, I’d have trouble finding a hiding spot for it. On the other hand, if I just displayed it proudly, I’d scare my mom.

“What is this?”

“Hm?”

I suddenly hear a cute voice from behind me. Sakurako-san and I both look back, and see a boy, around kindergarten aged, looking at a picture book. He has very short hair, and looks like a mischievous kid. He’s wearing a down jacket with blue polka dots on it, and a blue sweater with a hero from a popular kid’s show bravely posing in the centre.

“That’s a snake… a cobra, maybe?” I look at Sakurako-san while I answer. She nods, so I guess I’m right.

I suddenly notice that this is the child who jumped in front of the car earlier. I look at Sakurako-san again to make sure, and sure enough, she nods.

“A cobra? Cobroller?”

Even though we know that, this boy is only interested in the snake.

“Cob…? What did you say?” Sakurako-san looks confused.

“Uh… I think it’s an anime character that kids like.”

I explain to her that I think it’s a character from a popular game and anime series, but she wrinkles her brow. She holds the boy on her lap to keep him still.

“Do you understand? This is a dangerous snake. It’s probably a male king cobra. They live in India, and the areas around there. It has the most powerful neurotoxin out of all the venomous snakes. When it bites you, it cuts off the sensation in your nerves, so you can’t breathe and you’ll die. Basically, you won’t be able to move.” Sakurako-san says while gently pointing to the picture with a kind expression on her face.

“I already knew that.”

“I-I see.”

The boy responds with a blank expression. Maybe the anime character has abilities like that, or something. Even though he’s being sassy, it somehow sounds cute. I accidentally let out a laugh.

“Is it being electrocuted?”

“No, animals don’t turn transparent, even when electrocuted. That’s just a special effect. This is a skeletal specimen.”

“Hmph.”

I don’t know how much he understands, but the boy seems to be interested in the skeleton. I thought the book would be a bit scary for him, but he’s watching Sakurako-san flip the pages with so much enthusiasm. It looks like he has a bad habit of chewing on his fingernails. Sakurako-san notices, and casually holds both his hands in hers while she explains more about the specimens.

“What’s that? A dinothor?”

“No, it’s a hippo... it sure looks like a dinosaur, though. Every time I see those fearsome tusks, I’m reminded how misguided the idea that they’re stupid and innocent is.”

“I saw a hippo! It was big! I saw it from under it! There were tactus flowers!”

“Now that you mention it, they just built a new hippo enclosure at Asahiyama. The cacti, huh? There certainly were some round cacti near the entrance. You’re very observant.”

Watching the two of them talk makes me smile, but inside, I don’t feel so calm. I look around for his mom, but I don’t see her anywhere.

“Hey, weren’t you with your mom earlier?” Finally, I can’t wait anymore, so I ask the boy.

“Mama went to go make Maa-kun’s baby pants pretty again.”

I’m worried about what that means for a moment, but then realize he probably means she’s changing the baby’s diaper.

“Should we take him to the customer service desk?”

“Perhaps… but the reference book corner is right next to the children’s books and toys section. He was probably told to play there. When she comes back, she’ll call for her child.”

For now, we decide to wait a little longer and keep talking to the boy.

“But you can’t do this. You should always hold your mom’s hand properly, especially if there’s cars around,” I say. The boy pouts. He’s probably been told that countless times.

Somehow, I understand how he feels. When I was a child, even though I wasn’t spoiled, it was hard to stay still. As soon as my hands were let go, I would start running around. My mom and dad ended up helplessly needing to carry me. Apparently that happened until I was 4. My mom still complains about how heavy I was. I wasn’t able to hold hands properly until I was 4 - until my dad died. I kneel down on the floor to make it easier to talk to the boy.

“But cars are really dangerous, you know? If you don’t hold her hand, your mom might get hurt by a car.”

“...Mama will?”

“Yep. That’s why you definitely have to hold your mom’s hand to protect her. You’re the only one who can protect mama and Maa-kun near the road and in parking lots, right?”

The boy’s eyes widen for a moment.

“Do you understand? Can you do that?”

“...Yeah!”

I clench my hand in a fist and hit it against my chest. The boy strongly nods. I’m glad that my words - well, my grandpa’s words from when I was little - resonated with him.

“Ryuuki!” Just then, we hear a panicked woman calling out from a ways away.

“Mama!” The boy reflexively gets up, but his head hits Sakurako-san in the jaw.

The woman soon notices his voice, and looks toward us.

“I’m sorry, I told him not to move while I was in the washroom…”

“Children are raised by curiosity. How could such a small child follow those instructions?”

The mother rushes over to her son while apologizing. Sakurako-san speaks with an angry tone while rubbing her jaw. It looks pretty painful.

“My apologies… I’m sorry for the inconvenience…” She tightly squeezes her son while stroking his head, then bows in apology.

“It wasn’t an inconvenience. In the future, absolutely don’t let go of his hand.” Sakurako-san sounds really angry. Her normally pale cheeks are slightly flushed.

The mother looks surprised by how forcefully Sakurako-san spoke. She also seems a little uncomfortable, like she’s wondering why she’s being told this. She looks confused. Honestly, I’m also surprised by how angry Sakurako-san is. I think it might be because she’s in pain.

“You don’t want to do anything you’d regret… It's a dangerous world, after all. Gender and location don’t matter. You shouldn’t let your guard down because of things like ‘he’s a boy’ or ‘this is a safe area’. You never know who has bad intentions.”

Sakurako-san notices how angry she’s becoming, and takes a deep breath. She returns to her usual tone. The mother doesn’t seem like she fully understands what Sakurako-san is saying.

With a meek expression, she nods. “...Okay.”

“Also, this child seems lonely. He needs more attention. It’s only natural, since it’s only been around 3 years or so since he was just a baby. Even though he’s older now, he’s still a baby. Even if you dress yourself up, your brain doesn’t suddenly grow up, too.”

“Haa…”

Why is she even saying all this to a stranger? The mother clearly looks angry. She probably feels terrible right now. She takes a step away from Sakurako-san.

“Mama, your hand! Let’s go together!”

“Huh?”

Ryuuki-kun holds his hand out towards her. She looks down at her son, surprised, then glances over at us… Then she starts to smile. She looks really happy.

“...Then tomorrow, I’ll ask my mom to take care of my youngest, so we can go do something together.”

“That sounds good.”

The mother happily holds her child’s hand, and bows to us one more time before walking away. Ryuuki-kun is waking ahead of his mom, leading her by the hand.

“...I guess you can say good things once in a while.” Sakurako-san says with a laugh after they leave.

“It’s something my grandpa said. When I was a kid, I didn’t stay with my parents, either… But it wasn’t very kind of you to say that he’s lonely.”

“It’s the truth. Why else would he run away like that? It’s not like he hates his mom.”

“But…” I don’t know how to respond.

“It’s simple. He was just trying to get his mother’s attention. Hector also behaves strangely when he wants our attention, or wants us to follow him, right? It’s like that.”

“Kids and dogs aren’t the same.” Even though they’re both cute, they’re still different.

“Children and dogs are both the same in the fact that they both just want unconditional, pure love. Self harming behaviours, like biting one’s nails, can be born from a lack of emotional support. It’s not healthy to bite your nails to the point that they start bleeding. He’s currently in one of his most important stages of growth.” Sakurako-san says as she spreads her fingers to see her nails.

I wonder if she used to have a habit like that? Right now, her nails are a pretty shape, and light pink.

“...Well, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Boys grow up a bit when they have something they want to protect.”

I reach my hand out towards Sakurako-san. She notices and puts my hand in her palm. I’m kind of confused. She looks at me like she’s asking what’s wrong.

“No… Your hand is fine, but I thought the book might be heavy…”

“...Oh! R-right!” She quickly pulls her hand away from mine, and pushes the book towards me. Her face is red with embarrassment.

“Well… Maybe it’s better to hold hands.”

“I’m not a lost child!”

I can’t help but laugh. She shakes her head and starts walking away on her own. She looks just as nice as always.

“Well, it’s fine sometimes.”

I can still faintly feel the warmth from her hand in mine.